Table of Contents

1. ALLEGIANCES
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9
12. Chapter 10
13. Chapter 11
14. Chapter 12
15. Chapter 13
16. Chapter 14
17. Chapter 15
18. Chapter 16
19. Chapter 17
20. Chapter 18
21. Chapter 19
22. Character Designs I: Firepaw, Princess, Filou, Cloverpaw, and Luna

ALLEGIANCES

[image]

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER Bluestar- blue-gray she-cat, tinged with silver around her muzzle

DEPUTY Redtail- small tortoiseshell tom with a distinctive ginger tail
Apprentice, Dustpaw

MEDICINE CAT Spottedleaf- beautiful dark tortoiseshell she-cat with a distinctive dappled coat

WARRIORS

Lionheart- magnificent golden tabby tom with thick fur like a lion's mane
Apprentice, Graypaw

Tigerclaw- big dark brown tabby tom with unusually long front claws
Apprentice, Ravenpaw

Whitestorm- big white tom
Apprentice, Sandpaw

Darkstripe- sleek black-and-gray tabby tom

Longtail- pale tabby tom with dark black stripes

Runningwind- swift tabby tom

Willowpelt- very pale gray she-cat with unusual blue eyes

Mousefur- small dusky brown she-cat

APPRENTICES

Dustpaw- dark brown tabby tom
Mentor, Redtail

Graypaw- long-haired solid gray tom
Mentor, Lionheart

Ravenpaw- small, skinny black tom with a tiny white dash on his chest, and white-tipped tail
Mentor, Tigerclaw

Sandpaw- pale ginger she-cat
Mentor, Whitestorm

QUEENS

Frostfur- beautiful white coat and blue eyes

Brindleface- pretty tabby

Goldenflower- pale ginger coat

Speckletail- pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

ELDERS

Halftail- big dark brown tabby tom with part of his tail missing

Smallear- gray tom with very small ears. The oldest tom in ThunderClan

Patchpelt- small black-and-white tom

One-eye- pale gray she-cat, the oldest cat in ThunderClan. Virtually blind and deaf

Dappletail- once-pretty tortoiseshell she-cat with a lovely dappled coat

Rosetail- gray tabby she-cat with a bushy orange tail

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER Brokenstar- long-haired dark brown tabby

DEPUTY Blackfoot- large white tom with huge jet-black paws

MEDICINE CAT Runningnose- small gray-and-white tom

WARRIORS

Stumpytail- brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Brownpaw

Boulder- silver tabby tom
Apprentice, Wetpaw

Clawface- battle-scarred brown tom
Apprentice, Littlepaw

Nightpelt- black tom

Fernshade- slender tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

Ash-heart- pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICES

Brownpaw- brown tom
Mentor, Stumpytail

Wetpaw- gray tabby tom
Mentor, Boulder

Littlepaw- small brown tabby tom with blue eyes
Mentor, Clawface

QUEENS

Dawncloud- small tabby she-cat

Brightflower- black-and-white she-cat

ELDERS

Ashfur- thin gray tom

WINDCLAN

LEADER Tallstar- a black-and-white tom with a very long tail

DEPUTY Deadfoot- thin black tom with a twisted paw

MEDICINE CAT Barkface- dark brown tom with yellow eyes

WARRIORS

Sorrelshine- dilute tortoiseshell she-cat
Apprentice, Mallowpaw

Ashfoot- broad-faced gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Ridgepaw

Stagleap- huge stocky brown tom

APPRENTICES

Mallowpaw- brown-and-white patched she-cat with amber eyes
Mentor, Sorrelshine

Ridgepaw- brown tabby tom with piercing blue eyes
Mentor, Ashfoot

QUEENS

Morningflower- tortoiseshell she-cat with light amber eyes (mother to Gorsekit (tawny tabby tom-kit), Stork-kit (black she-kit with orange patches), and Quailkit (light gray she-kit))

RIVERCLAN

LEADER Crookedstar- a huge light-colored tabby with a twisted jaw

DEPUTY Oakheart- a reddish-brown tom

MEDICINE CAT Mudfur- long-haired light brown tom

WARRIORS

Beetlenose- broad-shouldered crow-black tom
Apprentice, Silverpaw

Reedtail- pale gray tabby tom with a black tuft of fur at his tail-tip
Apprentice, Vixenpaw

Sedgecreek- brown tabby she-cat with a long tail
Apprentice, Grasspaw

Leopardfur- dappled golden tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Whiteclaw- muscular dark brown tom with white paws

APPRENTICES

Silverpaw- silver she-cat with black stripes and bright blue eyes
Mentor, Beetlenose

Vixenpaw- pretty long-furred black she-cat with white paws
Mentor, Reedtail

Grasspaw- light brown tabby she-cat with pale green eyes
Mentor, Sedgecreek

CATS OUTSIDE OF THE CLANS

Yellowfang- old gray she-cat with a broad, flattened, face; rouge

Smudge- plump, friendly black-and-white kitten who lives in a house at the edge of the forest; kittypet

Barley- black-and-white tom who lives on a farm close to the forest; loner

Rusty- handsome, ginger tabby tom; kittypet

Luna- brown-and-ginger tortoiseshell, white tail-tip, green eyes; kittypet

Filou- light ginger tom with a white belly and paws, hazel eyes; kittypet

Tommy- brown-and-white tabby with leafy green eyes, missing half of his tail; kittypet

Princess- light brown she-cat with a white plume of fur on her

chest, white paws and green eyes; kittypet

Butters- ancient, pale gold she-cat with amber eyes and a small nick in one ear; kittypet

Prologue

The dark warrior's amber eyes flash, at once back in the heat of the battle. His short mane of tabby fur around his neck bristles in rage, and the large tabby swipes his long claws at his opponent.

The vapor-like flame colored tom is cheeky and a goody-two-shoes. He is handsome; all the she-cats want him, and above all, he has taken the tabby's rightful place as leader of ThunderClan. Leader of ShadowClan. Of *all* the Clans.

He is going to die.

With a fearsome yowl, the tabby Dark Forest warrior leaps forward, cherishing the feeling of flesh beneath his claws, the scent of victory pouring from his opponent's wounds... and then it is over.

With a snarl, the tabby warrior slams his paws down, the tom disappearing. A mrrow of laughter sounds behind him and he whirls around, claws unsheathed still.

"Fighting your demons, I see," the calico she-cat mrrows silkily.

"If I could get my claws on that fox-heart," the tabby growls in his deep baritone voice, kneading the hard earth beneath him.

The she-cat flicks her tail, thick fur as impeccably groomed as ever. "Of course. Wouldn't we all."

The tabby eyes her suspiciously. "Why are you here, Mapleshade?"

"No reason. I just thought you could use... an offer."

"An offer."

The she-cat's amber-gold eyes flash with impatience, and the tabby knows she will not be able to keep her secrets forever. She begins to draw herself forward, not breaking eye contact with the other warrior. "What would you do... if you could rewrite your story?

Make another choice... perhaps change time?"

The large warrior's ear flicks. He does not reply. His mind is on the flame-colored apparition of a leader from before. The she-cat continues.

"Perhaps... kill a cat, take the throne, be the rightful leader you know you should've been?"

"What are you asking, *Mapleshade,"* he hisses, spitting out the she-cat's name as an after-thought. The calico purrs, taking in the moment, knowing that she knows something the tabby does not.

"I've discovered an option—I can't do it myself, it's much too late... but you could. Turn back time. Take what was meant to be yours. Show the fox-heart who's the real leader."

The tabby growls at the thought of the young fiery leader. How arrogant. How *idealistic. How abhorrently perfect.*

"What will it take?" he asks, eyeing the she-cat, who is now laying out in a patch of moonlight. She shrugs.

"There's a pool over there; jump into it, hold your breath... you'll go back in time."

"Really."

"But of course. I'm a good cat; I don't kill," a sickly jubiliant grin of glee reaches up to her eyes, maw parting into a sneer of a smile.

The tabby rolls his eyes. "Fine. If I die, I will come back and kill you." With that, he trots off in the direction she had gestured.

If she's tricking me, she will die, he thinks, coming up to a silent, dark, pool. Scenting the air, he knows it is not blood; it is one of the few pools of water in the Dark Forest.

Taking a deep breath, he does not hesitate; into the water he dives. Quickly reaching the bottom, thanks to his excess of thick fur, he claws at the brambles. In his mind, he runs through a list of cats he hates. Pinestar. Bluestar. Redtail. Lionheart. Whitestorm. And... last

of all, Firestar, the arrogantly annoying kittypet who is now ruler ThunderClan.

With a great snarl, he smashes a hole through the vines at the bottom of the pool, and finds himself running out of breath; he takes no time in his escape. He slithers through the opening, hauling himself into the ethereal sky. His head. His shoulders. His body. And he is falling.

The great tabby finds himself hurtling down to earth from a dark patch of the sky, starless and devoid of light. As he falls at a break-neck speed, he feels himself growing smaller. Smaller than he has been in moons, possibly a decade. His shoulders become weak and small, his senses begin to dim.

As his amber eyes become blue and close, the familiar scent of ThunderClan wafts up to his nose. His last sound thought before he loses consciousness is evil in its most simplistic form.

I'm back, kittypet.

Chapter 1

[image]

Rusty's belly was full with freshly poured kibble. The tom's gingery pelt was neatly brushed, and he was finally ready to go out into the forest.

Months ago, he had had a dream of a mouse, and had nearly caught it... but his dream had stopped before he had had a chance. That was the day he had originally planned to venture out into the woods, but right before he jumped down from the fence his housefolk had brought out his favorite meal: freshly cut ham.

Its scent had overpowered the memory of the mouse, and he had jumped down, eating the ham right out of his housefolk's hand, purring and butting against his leg afterwards.

But now the call of the woods was strong once again, and Rusty was very much ready to venture out.

The mid-afternoon sun was cheery and bright, and as Rusty jumped down from the fence, he felt the familiar draw of the forest. Its oaks and birches, along with its dense undergrowth were calling- and so, Rusty answered the call and trotted into the forest.

The first thing he noticed was that everything was *big.* Like, *giant.* Huge, red, trees rose up into the air- something his friend back at the community, Butters had told him.

Rusty could recall her distinct words: "and then there's big, huge, trees that're called redwoods! But usually cats don't climb them 'cause they're sorta tall. I mean, they're great for squirrels, I guess, but I've heard hawks live up there." She had shivered, giving her shoulder a quick grooming.

And looking around, he saw huge clumps of brambles, and bushes and flowers. Everything was so bright and colorful and only slightly dangerous.

A bird call alerted him, and he looked over to spot from where it had come. The bird- a finch, perhaps?- was on the ground, chirping, perhaps trying to get the attention of another bird, or, maybe even, trying to hunt itself.

Wait, birds don't hunt, do they? Rusty's ears reddened in embarrassment at the thought. His pelt prickled, but he crouched down once again, tail sweeping over the earth, not touching any of the fallen leaves, but wildly, it flicked left then right then left again.

He crept forward, until he was maybe the length of a four-ish tails away from it, and then he heard it. It was soft- and he doubted it was anything dangerous. He kept going.

Three tail lengths in, he heard the sound again, this time louder, and more dangerous sounding. His pelt prickled, and he swiveled his ears around, to hear whatever it was more clearly.

And then there was a weight on his back, heavy and dangerous. Needle-sharp claws dug into his back and only dug in deeper as he tried to shake whoever it was off his back.

"Get... off!" he yowled, rearing up, trying to shake whatever cat it was off. He heard a sharp laugh, and then he lost his footing.

He fell down backwards, exposing his belly to the sky. He rolled over quickly, whoever it was off his back, jumping back a tail-length.

"Who are you?" a sandy she-cat hissed, tail whisking back and forth over the ground as the two circled each other. Her short fur was fluffed out as much as it would go and her green eyes were slitted.

"Who do you think I am?" Rusty asked dryly, mimicking his brother, Tommy.

The she-cat rolled her eyes. "I asked first," she shot back, not slowing her strides at all.

"Yeah, but I asked second," Rusty said smartly, trying to cover his fear. A scoff.

"I don't care, the first mouse caught is the most memorable," she said, holding her chin up.

Rusty sighed. "I just wanted to catch that bird, okay!? I didn't mean to hurt any cat—" *but clearly you did.*

The pale ginger she-cat flicked her ears. "A kittypet? Hunting? Yeah, when hedgehogs fly."

Rusty bristled, still pacing. "I was close, and then you pushed me."

The she-cat growled, fur bristled as well. "Get off ThunderClan land, kitty. And maybe I'll consider letting you go with your pelt on your shoulders."

A deeper voice called from the undergrowth, authority- and was that amusement?- lacing it. "Sandpaw, let the kittypet go in peace."

The gingery she-cat- who was called Sandpaw, apparently- turned to the long-haired white tom who had stepped from the bushes.

"Whitestorm, I was trying to defend our territory," she said in a quick, low, whisper.

"Why?" Rusty asked, tilting his head to the side. "I was merely hunting." He sat down, wrapping his tail over his paws.

The white tom gave him a once-over, looking from his head to his eyes to his collar to his paws.

"You're a sturdy kittypet, aren't you?"

Rusty's pelt prickled, and he gave the older tom an- what he hoped- unreadable look. "Why?"

Sandpaw gave a loud sigh. "Whitestorm! We have to catch up with Graypaw and Lionheart. *They promised we would have bragging rights for a moon."*

Rusty blinked. Surely, Sandpaw wasn't talking about the actual moon. Also, there were other cats like her and the white tom?

"There are others?" he asked, voicing his thoughts.

"Yes, kittypet," the white tom- whom Sandpaw had addressed as Whitestorm, although Rusty wondered if that was just a title or if it were actually his name- answered. "There are others."

Rusty's eyes lit up. "No way! More cats like you? Why does Graypaw's name sound like Sandpaw's? And why is the other one called Lion-something and not Lionstorm?"

Whitestorm gave a chuckle. "You ask many questions, kit."

Rusty bristled. He didn't know what a kit was, but it sounded like kittypet and kitten and he wasn't either of those- probably. "I'm not a kit!" he exclaimed.

Sandpaw gave him a smug look. "Then what *are* you?"

Rusty gave her a glare. "Not answering that question, that's what."

Whitestorm looked between the two, amusement evident in his gaze. "Well, Not-answering-that-question, I'm afraid we'll have to be going."

Sandpaw gave him a nod. "Finally," she whispered under her breath.

"What was that, Sandpaw?"

"Nothing," she mumbled, giving Rusty a look. "Hey, what's that on the rope on your neck?"

"Huh?"

"The collar," Sandpaw said, nodding at it.

"Oh. It's a bell."

Sandpaw's eyes lit up. "So you really *wouldn't* have been able to catch that finch!"

Rusty glared at her. "Yes, I would have, if you hadn't rolled me

over."

"Nuh-uh," she said, giving a smug grin.

Another glare. "Sandpaw, you're being *extremely annoying*."

"Ah, so I've succeeded. You're very easy to annoy, kittypet."

"Sandpaw!" Whitestorm called sharply, silencing his companion.

The gingery she-cat gave a smug look to Rusty. "I guess I'll see you around, kitty."

Rusty wasn't sure why, but she annoyed him a lot- like, a lot, a lot. And she confused him. Were all she-cats this confusing?

"Bye, *Sandpaw*," he said, giving her the same smug look she had given him. She glared at him, before bounding off, leaving her friend in the dust.

Whitestorm nodded to Rusty. "Goodbye, young one. Be careful not to trespass onto ThunderClan land again- our clanmates may not deal as kindly with you as Sandpaw did."

Rusty gave Whitestorm a nod as well, confused, but trying not to show it. "Bye, Whitestorm!"

The tom gave a little chuckle at Rusty's kit-like goodbye, which the ginger tom had immediately regretted giving, and began off.

"Whitestorm?" Rusty called after the tom, before he had gotten very far.

"Yes, kittypet?"

"Is it hard to live in a clan? Don't you have enough food?"

The long-haired tom thought a moment. "It's hard because we're always competing for food. There are other clans, but we have just enough cats to get just enough prey."

Rusty let out a small "oh", looking down at his paws, feeling a little

embarrassed at his own, plumpish belly, remembering Sandpaw's thin frame.

When he looked up, Whitestorm had disappeared, but he had made a decision: he was going to save the ThunderClan cats from starving.

Chapter 2

[image]

The pale yellow she-cat known as Butters lounged in the sun. "So you're saying, you want to save random kittys' lives because you have nothing better to do?"

"Well I have plenty better to do—" Rusty began before he cut himself off. "Okay, so maybe I'm low on things to do, but these cats need help!"

"It sounds to me as if they're well-fed, Rusty. Are you sure that's the best idea? I understand the allure of adventure and all, but really..." Princess trailed off, concern lacing her features as she gazed at her ginger-furred brother.

"The she-cat who attacked me—" he had intentionally left out the part about the tackle. They didn't *need* to know that part for the story to make sense, right? "—was skinny! She wasn't well-fed at all, Princess! Filou, did you see any forest cats when Tommy got his tail caught in the trap?"

Filou blinked, bringing his full-length, almost-sand-colored tail around to his side. "Well, no," he admitted, giving an uncomfortable shrug. "But it's not like it was in the woods! It was right outside my housefolks' house. You know how they are about mice. And besides, Tommy was looking for the wild cats, that's how he got chomped in the first place." Filou ruffled his pelt, a look of sheer fear crossing over his face before it quickly dissipated.

"Right, but think about the cats who are starving! Even the big fluffy cat—Whitestorm, that's what he was! I told you I'd remember, Filou—wasn't like us. It wasn't like he had food or anything."

A contemplative expression had come across Butters' face as she thought and listened to all of Rusty's words. "Rusty," she began, her raspy voice like how Rusty would imagine a piece of the soft cloth that lined his nest if it were rubbed against rough tree bark, "you

say these cats... live in the forest?"

The flame-colored tom's head bobbed up and down as quickly as it could go. "Yes! And they eat mice and birds and voles and shrews and mice and—and— shrews—"

"And did you by chance catch sight of a big, angry-looking cat, brown-and-black, with evil-looking stripes and nefarious-looking amber eyes?" Rusty's mind was at a standstill. *What do evil-looking stripes look like? And what does nefarious even* mean?

"Um... no?"

"Good. Stay away from him if you ever see him. I've seen him tear kits to shreds." With that, the older she-cat stood up, shook out her long pelt, and stalked back to her house.

"You... what!?" Rusty exploded after a moment, starting to dash after her only to find the catflap in the door of the house close in his face.

A horrified look was on Princess' face, and she began to quickly groom the fluffy plume on her chest, something she did when she was particularly worried.

"Rusty, I really don't think this is a good idea! You're going to get killed!"

Rusty straightened himself, bringing his fluffy ginger tail around and making his shoulders as stiff and broad as he could, something that was hard with his lanky, though slightly plump, form. "I'll do whatever it takes! Even if I have to leave my housefolk..." he trailed off. *Am I really prepared to go that far?*

Yes, a subconscious voice in his mind answered, and he straightened up a bit more. "Even if I have to leave my housefolk, I'll do it! Who wants to come with me?"

"I—I don't know, Rusty. It's a big decision. Besides, my housefolk got me a new toy recently, and I really don't want to leave that..." Princess paused a moment. "But if you want to go... I guess I'll stay back and help you?"

Rusty beamed, an excited tingling bouncing around his body, from his tail-tip to his muzzle. "Yes! What do you say, Filou?"

"Um. Well. It's a big decision, like Princess said... I have to—uh—talk to Tommy—. He's getting back from the cutter soon, and I have to get home to be there when he gets back—sorry." With that, he bounded off, scrambling up the fence and to the thunderpath that separated the various siblings' houses from one another's.

Rusty's eyes were wide. "The cutter? His tail was cut that bad?"

Princess shrugged. "I talked to Luna when it happened—you know how she lives closer to them—and she said there was blood all over the rockpath in their yard. It looked like a bird exploded."

Sounds like Luna, Rusty thought, the corner of his mouth trying to twitch up in a little half-smile. "I... guess that makes sense."

"Anyway," said his sister with a final sweep of her plume-like tail. "I have to get home. And you should too. It's almost dinner-time, and you know how the housefolk like to take their dogs out of the fences on those ropes at night. Bye, Rusty!" And she lepaed off, her light brown tabby coat the last thing Rusty saw of her for a while.

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Rusty stretched in his nest, with its soft cloth, fluffy bottom, and—a scratching sound came from the cat flap at the entrance of the house, and Rusty near-silently crept forward to confront whomever the intruder was.

"Rusty? Rusty! Let me in! It's me, Tommy!"

"Tommy?" Rusty asked aloud, before blinking, realizing that it was Tommy and that, yes, he was outside the catflap, begging to be let in.

Leaping into action, the ginger tom dashed out the back catflap—the housefolk never closed it—and scrambled onto the fence, tottering along it until he hopped down, breathing heavily, to Tommy's right.

"THERE you are! Took you long enough," said Tommy with a good-natured *mrrow* of laughter.

Rusty caught sight of a white, cloth-like thing on his brother's now-stumpy tail. "Is your tail okay!?"

Rolling his eyes, Tommy nodded quickly. "It's fine, they only lobbed the whole thing off.—" he paused for dramatic effect, waving his now-short tail back and forth, cackling when Rusty's eyes went as large as moons "—Anyways, we need to go to the forest. Now."

"Now?" While the forest sounded lovely, with its darkness and swooping trees and screaming owls and darkness, Rusty wasn't fond of dying, and quite preferred the option of sleeping rather than creeping out into the woods in the middle of the night.

"Now. I had a *dream*, Rusty. We *have to go* right *now*."

"But—but how will we find the clan-tribe cats?"

"Clan-tribe cats?"

"I can't remember if they called themselves clans or tribes, okay. How do we find them?"

Tommy gave a small grin, short tail whisking back and forth with excitement. "I know a cat."

"You know a cat," the dry statement came out, sounding not unlike something their sister, Luna, would say, and Tommy gave an eye-roll, the brown-and-white tabby flicking his half-length tail with slight annoyance. "Long story short, I met this tom, his name is Graypaw, and he told me where their camp was."

Rusty blinked. "He told you *exactly* where their camp was?" *What a furball!*

"Exactly! And I know where to find them and we have to save them!"

"Save them? From starvation?" Rusty's eyes were wide. *I was right! I knew they were dying!*

"No, fluff-brain! They're going to die of... well, actually, I don't know, but Graypaw said something about a flame and saving clams, so let's GO already."

With that, Tommy bounded to the fence, clawed his way up, and grasped it as tightly as he could with his needle-sharp claws. "You coming, or what?"

And so, Rusty started off with his brother in the forest. It was a harrowing experience. The trees seemed to loom over the two, their branches swaying in the light zephyrs that blew through the woods. The bushes rustled, as if cats waited all around to attack them, and the fallen leaves from the trees crunched softly beneath the two's paws. A few clouds floated in front of the full moon, although they only managed to block tiny slivers of the white light it cast.

Tommy opened his mouth and sniffed the air before closing it again. "We're close," he mewed in a low voice, green eyes taking in the sandy hollow the two had stumbled upon.

"What was that? Opening your mouth like that?"

"That? It's a trick my friend taught me. It's how you find out where the mouse is. Or... in this case, where the clan is."

As they crept towards the entrance of the camp, low whispers were heard.

"Obviously, we can't kill her in her sleep! It's too obvious, they already know something is amiss." The bass-like voice of an older cat sounded, and, although deep, it rattled Rusty to his core, making him shiver slightly.

"No, you're too obvious," hissed the other cat. His voice cracked in the middle, anger apparent, and Rusty could imagine his ears flat against his head, anger burning in his... whatever-color-his-eyes-were gaze.

Beside Rusty, Tommy shifted his foot slightly, although slightly was slightly too far. The tiniest sound of a twig breaking pierced through the aside-from-the-whispers silent night.

"Do you hear that? Get to your position. And don't whisper a word of this conversation to Runningwind." With that, the voice-cracking cat dashed off to his post, while the bass-voiced one stalked off to the entrance.

"Perfect," whispered Tommy, creeping forward, keeping to the less-than-ample shadows. "Follow me, and maybe we can sneak into the camp. There's bound to be some cat there to—"

"Stop right there! Who do you think you are?" snarled the voice-cracking tom from the entrance of the camp, leaping forward with his claws outstretched. His tall form towered over Tommy and Rusty, who were crouched down to sneak into the camp. Dark, tabby, markings covered his jaunt face, his long tail flicking with annoyance.

"Uh—" Rusty began, before Tommy straightened up.

"We're here on official business! If you want your group of forest cats to survive, you'll let us talk to the leader!"

The tom leaped forward, pinning Tommy to the ground. "Why. Are. You. Here. Kittypet!?" The last word was snarled as if it were a curse, and Tommy's lips began to curl back, anger showing in his eyes.

"You—" he began, before the other tom at the entrance of the camp fast-walked over.

"Longtail! You know what Bluestar said. Don't attack random kittypets—*especially* if they're kits!"

Longtail—the tom who pinned Tommy down, digging his claws into his shoulders—flicked his ear in annoyance. "Put a moss ball in it, Runningwind. This one deserves death."

"Don't you think that's a bit extreme? We're taking them to Bluestar and that's it. Let him up, Longtail."

"No," snarled Longtail, glaring at Tommy still, ears pinned back to his head. "He gets a lesson on trespassing."

"Let him go, Longtail," spoke Runningwind, the light brown tabby tom's tail sweeping back in an annoyed rhythm.

"I'll teach him the lesson... by the claw." He raised his paw to swipe at Tommy, who wriggled, trying to get out of his grip, kicking at the tom's belly with his legs.

"LET HIM GO," yowled Rusty, leaping forward to tackle the tom. By sheer luck, he rammed into the tom's shoulder, bowling him over by a miracle. He clawed at the stronger tom, trying to grab ahold of him, and out of the corner of his eye saw the other guard of the entrance dash away into the camp. *Don't leave me!* he thought, as he fiercely fought at the tom's blows, which struck hard and true.

"Stop! Longtail, I command you as the leader of ThunderClan to stop!" A voice rang through the still night, and Longtail slowly backed away from Rusty, both toms' chests heaving as they struggled for air.

"Bluestar, this kittypet—" Longtail began, tail brushing against the leaves as it twitched irritably back and forth.

"I have heard. Yet, because one of our warriors—" the blue-gray she-cat, whose fur looked silvery in the moonlight, cast Longtail an annoyed look "—has wounded this... kit, it is ThunderClan's responsibility to keep him in the medicine den until he is well."

"What!?"

Rusty and Longtail's voices joined in the combined confusion of the moment, before their words deluged into a confused combination of various phrases.

"That's never how it's been in the past—"

"I really don't need to stay in a random cat's camp, I should be going—"

"Not even Oakstar was mouse-brained enough to—"

"Enough! Kittypet, you will stay with ThunderClan until you recover. As will your friend," she nodded to Tommy who gingerly

licked his shoulder. "Meanwhile, we will discuss this... business in the morning. Runningwind, go wake Spottedleaf and show these two where they may rest in the medicine den. Longtail, see me."

Runningwind dipped his head and motioned with his tail for the brothers to follow. Rusty glanced at Tommy, who reciprocated the look, before he started forward, slowly following the tom.

Longtail brushed past him, bumping him with his shoulder and hissing something in his ear before he ducked down beneath the brambles and into the camp.

A warm zephyr ruffled Rusty's fur, before, giving one last longing look in the direction they had come, he ducked into the camp.

Chapter 3

[image]

Rusty's eyes flickered open, taking in the sunlight which lazily shone through the fronds of what he now knew to be the medicine den. Beside him, Tommy snored softly, short tail flicking as he presumably dreamed. The high rock walls of the den rose up, their dark gray a chilled contrast to the warm greens of the ferns near the entrance.

Finally, giving a yawn, Tommy woke up and stretched, his nose beginning to quiver almost immediately.

"What is that... smell?" he asked, trying to find the root of it. It was sweet, and something like flowers, mixed with the scent of... was that mint? Rusty could only shrug.

"I dunno," he admitted, his own tail flopping up and down as he thought. "Maybe it's one of those plants?" The tip of his tail flicked towards the bundles of leaves stored in the crevices of the large stone walls.

In through the entrance burst an estranged sandy she-cat, green eyes glaring anywhere and everywhere. "SPOTTEDLEAF," she cried, eyes finally befalling the tortoiseshell she-cat at the back of the den, whom Rusty had failed to notice before, who also happened to be the source of the scent. "PLEASE tell Dustpaw to STOP being INSANELY ANNOY—wait, what is *he* doing here?" Her gaze darted to Rusty.

The calico—known as Spottedleaf—blinked. "Why would I have jurisdiction over Dustpaw..?" she asked, pulling her tail over her paws, abandoning her searching for herbs.

"Because you're his mentor's sister!"

"... and he's deputy. Besides, he's grown up now."

"But you can sway his opinion, can't you?"

Spottedleaf hesitated before changing the subject. "Sandpaw, have you met Rusty and Tommy?"

Sandpaw's eyes narrowed at Spottedleaf's answer but her gaze slowly turned over to Rusty. "I've met *one* of them," she finally acknowledged, striped tail flicking back and forth.

"Great! I was wondering, would you maybe show them around..?"

Sandpaw's jaw dropped to the ground. "Spottedleaf, they're KITTYPETS."

Spottedleaf blinked her amber eyes pleadingly. "And they're our *guests.* It's only the right thing to do."

Sandpaw opened her mouth to object before closing it once more, setting her jaw. "Fine." She flicked her tail, beckoning the two to follow her. "Come on."

Rusty glanced at Tommy, who looked back at him before giving a shrug. "I guess we should..?"

"I mean, you wanted the warrior cats experience, didn't you..?"

"I suppose it's a good idea..?"

Sandpaw poked her head back in, glaring at the two. "Come. On. I don't have all day to wait for a couple of moss-brained kittypets."

Spottedleaf gave an unapproving humph as the two scrambled out of the nests, both giving the other wide-eyed looks before following the light ginger she-cat.

The camp was huge, much larger than Rusty's home. The small area the medicine den was in—a grassy bit of the larger clearing—was nothing compared to the rest of it, which was sandy with large,

sloping, walls.

Cats milled about everywhere, whether they were kits swiping at butterflies that drifted around the nursery, or important-looking cats strutting about hollering out orders, or even the older cats who lay about in pools of sunlight.

Sandpaw gave a prolonged groan. "Well, what do you fur-brains want to see first?"

Rusty's eyes were huge. "I—don't know. This place is so huge and so amazing..." he trailed off, glancing to the she-cat, noticing the way her tail flicked back and forth impatiently, but only the tip, as if they weren't worth the rest of her tail's frustration. Tommy's ears perked up.

"Who're they?" he asked, his clover-colored eyes bright with excitement as he watched a group of cats come through the entrance of the camp. There were four of them, one of which Rusty recognized from a few days ago as Whitestorm.

"A patrol," Sandpaw replied with a shrug of her shoulders. "Most likely a—oh *no."* Her face darkened, and she squinted her green eyes, catching sight of a fluffy gray tom who meandered in behind the rest of the group.

Tommy grinned. "Graypaw!" he exclaimed, trotting over to the tom.

"Graypaw?" Rusty asked, padding after his brother, slight confusion written across his face.

"Moss-brained pompous little shrew," Sandpaw growled under her breath, only loud enough for Rusty to hear. *She's very... creative... with her insults,* he finally mused, a small smile crossing over his muzzle.

"Tommy? What're you doing here?" Graypaw asked in surprise, fluffy pelt standing on end before quickly relaxing at Tommy's presence in the camp.

"Long story!" Tommy explained cheerfully before shrugging. "We're just here for a few days." His eyes slowly moved down to Graypaw's

paws, where a mouse had been dropped. "You went hunting this morning?"

Rusty caught up with his brother, and found Sandpaw dragging her paws moodily behind him, as if the world was collapsing. "Whoa! A *mouse!?"*

Graypaw grinned. "Yup! I was the first one to catch any fresh-kill this morning." His eyes darted over to Sandpaw and a smug look crossed the gray tom's face. "Morning, Sandpaw."

Sandpaw huffed. "Hi." The gingery-tan she-cat's tail flicked irritably over the ground. "This is Rusty and Tommy. They're somehow welcomed intruders."

A snort came from the long-furred tom. "If you two managed to get Sandpaw's fur in a tangle, you're welcome in ThunderClan camp," he laughed, much to Sandpaw's annoyance.

"That's not funny, Graypaw—"

"Shut up, Graypaw," a voice sounded behind Rusty, who whirled around to face said voice.

Behind him stood a dark brown tabby tom, yellow eyes glaring. "Who are *you?"* he asked, more a statement than a question, eyes narrowing further.

"Kittypets," Sandpaw said, tail-tip flicking as she stared down the two toms. Tommy's face darkened, his brown ear tip twitching in annoyance.

"You know, being a kittypet isn't such a bad thing," he started, curling his tail around his paws as he tended to do before beginning a long, drawn-out debate.

Sandpaw scoffed. "Sure thing, kibble-eater. I don't know who let you into camp anyways, that was really a bad move—" she was cut off by the clearing of some cat's throat. Sandpaw whirled around so quickly that her tail accidentally—*was it really?*—whacked Rusty in the face.

"Wh-Whitestorm! I didn't see you there. Can I help you..?" the she-cat trailed off, her straightened form stiff and unchanging as she tilted her head up at her mentor.

A smile tugged at the corners of Whitestorm's mouth, and the snowy white tom shook his head. "I came by the talk to our guests but decided to wait until you were done welcoming them. Bluestar —the cat who welcomed them into camp—wants to see them in her den."

Sandpaw's eyes widened, and the fur on her spine began to rise in apprehension. *"Bluestar* let them into camp!?"

"Who's Bluestar?" Rusty asked innocently, head tilted a bit to the side. *A blue... star? By the way Luna talked, I always got the impression that they were big and yellow and all fiery. I guess they can be blue though, too..?*

Sandpaw's eyes widened comically once more. "You don't know who *Bluestar* is!?"

Graypaw gave a guffaw of laughter. "Sandpaw, he's been here for— what, a day? Oh, not *even* a day! How would he know who Bluestar is?" Rusty gave a slight nod of thanks to Graypaw, a sheepish smile coming over his face.

"But he should still know who the greatest warrior in all of ThunderClan history is!" Sandpaw exclaimed, energy coming off in waves from the she-cat.

A small chuckle was heard from Whitestorm before he nodded to Tommy and Rusty. "Bluestar *is* pretty great," he admitted after a moment. "And... she'd like to see you."

Sandpaw shook her head, confused. "She wants to see *them?"*

Whitestorm gave a bemused smile. "Of course. Like you said, these kibble-eaters are on ThunderClan territory," he said, the word not coming out as an insult, as it had with Sandpaw. He beckoned the two brothers with his fluffy tail before turning away.

"I guess I'll see you later..?" Graypaw trailed off, giving a slight nod

to Tommy, who he apparently was good friends with.

"Sure thing," Tommy said smoothly, nodding back. Rusty glanced between the two. *How do they even* know *each other?*

Rusty gave a small nod, copying his brother, before following the ticked tabby tom who hurried after Whitestorm. Behind him, he heard Sandpaw huff.

"Hey, Sandpaw!" Graypaw called, clearly from farther off, the tom's voice betraying the grin that was spread across his face.

"What?" Sandpaw asked, her green eyes presumably narrowed, gaze burning into Rusty as he followed his brother.

"Wanna share a squirrel?" The gray tom asked, his mew smug. Sandpaw scoffed.

"When hedgehogs fly."

With that, Rusty ducked into Bluestar's den, collar jingling as he pushed his way through the fronds that hung at the entrance. The interior of the den was dark, with a nest at the very back, and a large, blue-gray she-cat regally sitting in the center, icy blue eyes searing through Rusty's fur.

"Greetings, Bluestar," Whitestorm spoke, dipping his head to the leader in respect. He flicked his tail, first hitting Tommy, and then Rusty with it, urging the two to do the same.

Rusty copied the older tom, and when he looked up, saw the faintest hint of a smile in Bluestar's eyes, as if amused at their imitation of the warrior. She inclined her head towards the three before giving Whitestorm a look to excuse him.

As the fluffy tom left the den, Rusty's pelt prickled in slight concern as he stared at Bluestar, who was terrifying and only a little bit smaller than Tommy and himself combined.

"So," she began, looking between the two. "I take it you are brothers, yes?"

Tommy nodded. "Mhm," he said, wrapping his tail around his paws as well, copying the blue-gray she-cat.

Bluestar nodded thoughtfully. "And what were you doing on ThunderClan land?"

"We were looking for you. ThunderClan, actually, if you want to be more specific," Tommy answered, pausing for a moment and giving Rusty the chance to jump in for more explanation.

"We knew that you forest cats had to hunt for your food. And while that sounds great—amazing, actually—it has to be hard to find prey in the cold season. So... we wanted to help!"

Bluestar stiffened more. "What makes you think we can't survive through leaf-bare?"

"We never said that—"

"—we just meant that it would be easier to survive—"

"—if you had some assistance."

The blue-gray she-cat's fur lifted. "We don't need assistance from *kittypets.* We can hunt for ourselves."

Tommy persisted, stepping forward slightly. "But wouldn't it be easier—"

Bluestar frowned. "The warrior life is not meant to be easy. If anything, we would need more paws to hunt, but seeing as we have plenty of warriors and apprentices at the moment, it's hardly necessary for you to help."

"That may be true, but—" Tommy bartered before Rusty poked him with his tail and he stopped talking.

"You may stay in camp until you are completely healed. After that, a patrol will escort you back to twoleg place. Do not come back onto ThunderClan territory after that."

Rusty opened his mouth to speak but was silenced as a tortoiseshell

tom dashed into the den, barely making it past the fronds that hung at the entrance. His eyes were wild, and he was breathing hard as if he had run for miles without stopping.

"Redtail, what's the matter?" Bluestar asked, ears swiveling forward, icy gaze unwavering as she surveyed the situation.

"Ravenpaw is dead." With that, he collapsed.

Chapter 4

[image]

Rusty's eyes widened, his heart quickening. *Who's Ravenpaw? And how did he die? Is he like Sandpaw? Their names are the same, why—* the blue-gray she-cat known as Bluestar interrupted his thoughts with a clearing of her throat.

"This meeting is over," she said sharply before quickly walking over to the short red-and-brown tom who had collapsed at the entrance of the den. Another she-cat—this one a fluffy golden color—darted to the entrance of her den, helping Bluestar to nose the tom up and bring him out into the suddenly dreary sunlight.

"Bluestar!" a thin-faced tom called, running into the camp and dipping his head respectfully. "Ravenpaw is gone and—" he stopped speaking on account of Bluestar's silencing tail wave.

"I'm aware. I'm calling a clan meeting about it—please, gather up the apprentices," her tone was softer and more comfortable with the tom, and Rusty couldn't help but wonder if they were somehow related. The light brown tabby dipped his head once more before racing over to a cluster of fronds and an old tree stump and disappearing into a small area beneath the branching root system.

Bluestar elegantly padded forward, leaping up onto the High Rock and clearing her voice before expertly summoning all of ThunderClan to a meeting. "May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High Rock for a clan meeting!" she called, voice clear and strong.

Cats emerged from every which direction, and, as social as Rusty was... he couldn't help but feel a little intimidated by the sheer number of cats gathering. Tommy was front-and-center, only a few tail-lengths away from a large, brown, tabby who paced back and forth, a worried and grief-stricken look etched onto his face. The tom's thick tail swished from side-to-side as he walked, his large form only made larger by his prickled fur.

Rusty was shoved playfully and knocked out of his otherwise concerned thoughts by Graypaw, who gave a grin. "Finally decided to join ThunderClan?" he asked, a leaf sticking out from his bushy gray fur. *He doesn't know.*

From the top of the High Rock, Bluestar spoke once more before the flame-colored tom had to break the news to Graypaw. "Tigerclaw," she spoke, addressing the pacing tom, her voice the perfect example of a controlled leader. "What happened?"

The tabby tom's gaze surveyed the crowd of cats, and Rusty thought he saw something flicker in his amber eyes—*was it satisfaction?*—as he looked about. Then his gaze caught on Tommy, and further back, Rusty, and he narrowed his eyes before giving an upset, yet respectful, nod to the lithe blue-gray she-cat. He opened his mouth to speak, before closing it, before repeating the action and finally forcing words out, raising his head to shakily address the clan.

"I was on the dawn patrol with Redtail, Runningwind, and Ravenpaw, and we were near ShadowClan's border, marking it. Redtail went ahead to mark further on, towards RiverClan, and Runningwind stayed to watch for cats... while Ravenpaw and I stayed back to mark where we were already. Ravenpaw... wanted to show me something he had learned how to do... and... and... then he tried to leap over the bank of the river onto RiverClan land, and was so close... but a RiverClan warrior jumped at him from nowhere, and both disappeared into the water."

A gasp came from the clan, who had been listening intently to Tigerclaw's story, at the end of which the large tabby simply hung his head once more, as if he had run out of words to describe the situation. "They both disappeared under the water. He probably would've survived if not for the rains from several days ago... but now he's gone."

A frosty silence followed, and Rusty tried to fluff his pelt up to store his heat. He shouldn't have been so cold, as it was the warmer part of the year, but the large brown tom's story had chilled him—and it seemed, most of the clan—to their cores.

A screech rang out from somewhere in the clearing and a brown

she-cat leapt out, tackling Tigerclaw to the ground. Her red-tipped tail lashed, and it took the fluffy golden she-cat from earlier and her twin, Lionheart—who the brothers had met in the medicine den earlier—to haul her off the tom.

Murmurs spread throughout the crowd as Tigerclaw rose to his feet, shaking his pelt slightly, a new nick in his ear. "You killed my son!" the brown-and-red she-cat yowled, barely restrained by the warriors beside her.

Tigerclaw lowered his head apologetically. "I did not. He was a good apprentice of ThunderClan," he mewed, deep voice slow and appropriately saddened. He raised his head once more, eyes going from the she-cat to the rest of the clan. "It was the RiverClan warrior Leopardfur who killed him. Both were taken by the river, despite RiverClan's abilities." The last part was a sneer, and beside him, Rusty felt Graypaw tense up more than he already had been.

"That's not true," he mumbled, yellow eyes wide with disbelief. He had crouched down to the ground, and seemed to be trying to hold himself up, rather unsuccessfully. "He can't be dead."

The clan seemed to be thinking the same thing. Throughout the throng of ThunderClan cats, unrest wrtihed, like a snake in the grass—Rusty had seen one as it slithered through, before his twolegs smashed it with a broad and flat stone attached to a stick—waiting to attack.

Finally, the pretty golden she-cat from before stepped out of the crowd and padded forward to stand beside Tigerclaw, rubbing her cheek against his in sympathy. The two's tails intertwined together, and Tigerclaw didn't look as upset as before, given the she-cat's presence beside him.

Bluestar's gaze was unreadable as she stood atop the Highrock and cleared her throat. "Ravenpaw was a good apprentice. While his death was untimely... he will not be forgotten in ThunderClan. His vigil will be tonight. For now... everyone, please return to your normal duties."

Tommy looked to Rusty, who looked back at him. Rusty shrugged,

and Tommy copied the motion before Bluestar caught sight of the two once more and leapt down from the Highrock, gesturing with her tail for the toms to once again follow her into her den.

"Yes! Round two!" with that, Tommy raced after the she-cat, leaving Rusty beside Graypaw, who still looked barely able to move.

"Graypaw? You okay?" he asked, nudging his acquaintance—scratch that, *distant friend*—with his nose. Graypaw's pelt wasn't as fluffy as it had been when the clan meeting had first started, and he barely shook his head.

Nudging the tom up, Rusty led him to the medicine den, where he really hoped Spottedleaf would be able to help. The she-cat blinked upon seeing Graypaw, and immediately got to work, settling him into one of the soft nests and gently asking questions.

Rusty ducked out away from the hanging fronds and out from the cleft where the she-cat was questioning Graypaw and into the sunlight. He surveyed the camp, taking in all of it, before noticing the red-and-brown tom from earlier carefully watching him from across the clearing.

With a sudden lurch, he realized. He blinked before realizing he really needed to be at a meeting with Bluestar and Tommy—*I hope she didn't claw his ears off*—and racing across the earthen ground, and skidding to a stop a few tail-lengths away from the entrance to Bluestar's den, giving his chest a few quick licks, and padding in very calmly.

In the dimly lit den, he surveyed the scene carefully. Bluestar stared intently at Tommy, who was rattling off a list of herbs.

"... and then there's blackberry leaves, which my friend Butters gave me once, 'cause I got stung by one of those big bees—you know, the angry ones that attack you for no reason? And there's also—" the light tabby tom turned to look at his brother with a smile on his face, green eyes bright even in the darkness. "Hi Rusty! I was just telling Bluestar about herbs."

Bluestar's whiskers twitched in amusement, and she turned her

unreadable gaze to Rusty. "We were discussing a potential... addition to the clan," she spoke calmly, considering her words carefully.

Rusty blinked. He hadn't considered this at all. He just wanted to make sure they were fed well. "I don't know if—" Tommy rolled his eyes and cut him off quickly.

"Rusty! Think of all the excitement! Fighting cats! Feeding the clan! Don't you want to be part of something? Part of something big?"

"I... guess," Rusty admitted, giving a small shrug of his shoulders. "But I have a home with my housefolks. I can't just... outright leave."

The blue-gray she-cat nodded understandingly. "I understand you have a home already. But would you consider, perhaps, becoming a clan cat? If only for part of the time?" she asked diplomatically, an ear flicking.

"What do you mean?"

"A sort of... daylight warrior, perhaps? Hunting during the day, fighting for ThunderClan during the day, then at night returning to your twolegs?"

Rusty thought. *A warrior by day... a kittypet by night,* Rusty thought, tilting his head to the side. Tommy's words were drowned out by a torrent of thoughts, and he barely heard the tom's response to Bluestar. *If I were to do this... it wouldn't be so different than it is now, would it? They don't see me... and they don't know where I go anyways....*

"How about a trial?" Tommy asked, a joking smile coming onto his face.

"A trial?" Rusty's brows furrowed. "Like... guilty or inocent?"

"No!"

"Yes, I suppose that would be a good idea," Bluestar said, head tilted a degree to the left. "After all, you will be hunting for

ThunderClan."

Tommy's jaw slackened and Rusty couldn't help but give a little grin. "Sure," he said, having considered the issue. "Sounds like a breeze."

"Rusty, are you insane!?" Tommy spat, surprised and taken aback by the idea.

"Then it's settled. If the senior warriors decide that you're suitable for clan life, you may join, if only by day. But if not, you will remain kittypets." She looked between the two for any objections and found Tommy silently seething with anger at Rusty's agreement. Rusty, meanwhile, sat straight, ginger tail curled around his paws, the perfect example of an annoying sibling.

"Let us go, then. I'll call the senior warriors together, and you... will wait." With that, the she-cat left the den, leaving Rusty and Tommy to look at each other in confusion. *This will end well,* Rusty couldn't help but think as he settled down to wait.

Tommy was hyperventilating beside him. "Rusty! Do you realize what you just signed us up for!?"

The ginger tom blinked slowly. "Yes? A casual interview with some ThunderClan warriors?"

"Did you see their faces when they saw us in camp!? Rusty, they HATE our guts!"

"Really?" Rusty asked, in his own world, barely registering the light tabby tom who paced back and forth.

"Yes! Did you see that brown-and-red tom back there? You know the one who dramatically flopped? He hates me! I know it!" with that, he melted into a pile of fur, paws over his muzzle, trying to hide from the world.

Rusty bumped his brother with his shoulder as Lionheart poked his maned head in the den, looking very much like a lion at that particular moment in time. "It's time," he whispered, leaping up to follow Lionheart, Tommy's dreary presence evident behind him.

Chapter 5

[image]

The meeting went... interestingly. Questions flew over eachother, like the spray from the thick vine thing from which water flew out of that was attached to Rusty's housefolks' dwelling. Rusty had answered most of the questions directed at him with little trouble. Questions like "How old are you?", "Why should you join ThunderClan?", and "How will you be useful to ThunderClan?" were pretty easy. Tommy on the other paw... had a very interesting time.

When a question was asked of him—even from the most polite warrior, like the brown she-cat with the red tail-tip and a small red marking on her chest from earlier, whose name was apparently Robinwing, took him some time to answer, and he stuttered. A lot. But he did get around to answering, and when the "interrogation" as Tommy had mournfully called it, ended, the verdict was positive.

"Are there any cats who do not wish for Tommy and Rusty to join ThunderClan, whether half or full-time?" Bluestar asked of the assembled cats, who had met behind a ring of shrubs and bushes near the medicine den.

"I do," Tigerclaw, the tom who had reported Ravenpaw's death from earlier growled, amber eyes staring into Rusty's soul. "I don't like the look of them, especially the orange one."

The corners of Rusty's mouth tilted downward, and he sighed. "Really, Tigerclaw?" a voice asked, and Rusty looked up to see the large white tom known as Whitestorm. "You don't want fresh blood in ThunderClan? I know you're mourning the loss of Ravenpaw—" he nodded to Ravenpaw's mother, Robinwing "—but we need some new faces around here. They'll be a valuable asset to the clan, whether it be by hunting or defending it, and why wouldn't we want more loyal warriors?"

Tigerclaw grunted, glare going from Tommy to Rusty. "Don't like

the looks of him. Besides, literally nobody thinks it's a good idea, aside from you—" he stopped talking on account of the brown-and-red tom clearing his throat.

He hadn't spoken at all during the interrogation, only watching Rusty and Tommy's reactions to the questions. "I think it's a good idea," he said, soft-spoken voice ringing out among the oddly quiet group.

"Why would you—" Tigerclaw stopped talking once more, being cut off by a glare from a silver she-cat who sat next to Redtail.

"He's going to explain his position in a second, stop interrupting," she said, blue eyes narrowed. Spottedleaf, who sat on the other side of Redtail, gave a nod, glancing over to her brother, whose amber gaze was cool. A few quiet laughs came from cats in the group, and Tigerclaw bristled with rage, despite quieting down.

"I saw him earlier. He was helping Graypaw across the camp to Spottedleaf. I'm certain he hadn't met Graypaw before today, but he helped. If that's not a warrior's heart, I don't know what is."

Tigerclaw glared at Rusty but remained silent, the mews of acknowledgment of this fact rolling over the council of senior warriors. "I still don't think it's a good idea," Rusty could've sworn he heard Tigerclaw mutter, but dismissed the thought. *Surely not.*

Bluestar nodded to her warriors. "All in favor of Rusty and Tommy joining ThunderClan," she mewed diplomatically, tall ears twitching, "put your left paw forward."

Rusty looked at all the different paws in amazement. Nearly all were forward—only three weren't. One belonged to the brown tabby—not surprising—and another to a tan-colored tabby, whose gaze was distrustful. The last one was a dark gray tabby whose yellow eyes bore into Rusty's pelt. ... *Yikes.*

Beside him, Rusty felt Tommy's fur lift, and he flicked his tail, trying to get the message across that it was over and there really wasn't anything to worry about, and Tommy, *stop making our opponents mad.*

A moment of silence passed and Bluestar flicked her elegantly long tail. "It is settled, then. I will call a meeting and you two will become a part of ThunderClan." With this, she gave a nod to the assembled cats, a gesture clearly signaling dispersion.

From the trio of angry-looking toms—the ones who had all disagreed with the decision—Rusty heard... a *lot* of grumbling.

"He's not clan-born! Once a kittypet always a kittypet, I say," the tan tabby said knowingly, eyes darting suspiciously to Rusty who couldn't help but hear the conversation.

"Yes," the dark gray tom agreed, voice velvety as some of the toys Rusty had seen the twoleg kits playing with but in a really weird way. "I've heard that kittypets can't hunt at all. I mean, with those annoying bells on their collars, it's a miracle those kits didn't lead the twolegs straight to our camp."

Tigerclaw glanced over at Rusty and Tommy and noticed their gazes and flicked his tail. "The kittypets are eavesdropping. What did we expect? Come on, let's get some fresh-kill... before they poison it with their two-leg food." With that, the large tabby turned, padding away towards the fresh-kill pile.

Rusty blinked and slowly turned on his heel to face the red-and-brown tom who had spoken earlier. "Hi..." he trailed off, realizing he had been deserted by his own brother, who had presumably gone to find Graypaw.

The tom's ear twitched and he nodded his head in hello. "Greetings, Rusty."

"Thanks for... standing up for me back there. I appreciate it," the fiery tom said, looking down at his paws and then back up to the tom, who peered at him intently.

"Of course. Every cat deserves a chance. Even the not-so-clanborn ones." His amber eyes blinked slowly and thoughtfully, as if he had a lot to chew on from the interrogation that had ended only a few moments ago.

Rusty struggled for words. "Yeah..." he trailed off once more. *Tails and stripes, I* hate *talking to grown-up cats!* Seeming to sense Rusty's thoughts, the red-tailed tom gave a *mrrow* of laughter.

"I'm Redtail, deputy of ThunderClan. So sort of like second in command. I take it you and Tommy are brothers?"

Rusty nodded slowly. "Mhm."

"Do you have any other siblings?"

Another nod. "I have three others. They weren't really interested in the whole 'saving the clan' business. Tommy invaded my home in the middle of the night... and now I'm here," he finished, fidgeting and kicking around a pebble he had found near his paws.

Redtail heaved a sigh. "Let me explain it quickly: there are cats in this clan who do not like you. Not now, at least. I'm not sure what's wrong with Tigerclaw, but he's very influential in ThunderClan, and I would try to get on his good side if I were you. And if—" he paused as Bluestar's voice rang out over the camp, and then continued hurriedly "—he convinces the rest of the clan not to like you, right at the start... it's up to you to prove yourself. Work twice as hard, double your efforts, whatever you must do. But you must become a warrior. Got it?"

Rusty's green eyes were wide and he gave a slow nod. "Yes," he said quickly, heart pounding in his chest. *You must become a warrior.* The deputy had said it with such intensity, such a fire in his amber eyes, that Rusty couldn't help but feel like he was missing something, until he realized he had to *go.* Right *then.*

"We've gotta go," he whisper-yelped, scrambling out from behind the brush, Redtail dutifully following. He raced toward the High Rock, sitting in the shadow of it, and looked up at Bluestar, who was speaking to the clan.

"It is traditionally unheard of to allow an outsider into a clan—especially ThunderClan. But because of recent events, I have come to realize that ThunderClan does indeed need new warriors. New apprentices. New blood. And so, I am allowing—StarClan willing—

these two kittypets to join the clan."

Murmurs of disbelief spread like ripples among the cats. From the far reaches of the group, Rusty thought he heard Graypaw explode into a spirited "yes!", and an accompanying groan from Sandpaw, but he kept his head back, craning his neck to watch his soon-to-be leader.

"But they will not be full apprentices. They will be, for the time being, at least, daylight apprentices, maybe occasionally staying the night, but for the most part staying with their two-legs." Her ear flicked, and several cats looked at Rusty and Tommy with unsavory glares. Rusty's ears began to warm, and he willer Bluestar on with his thoughts.

"Rusty, do you promise to be a loyal apprentice to ThunderClan, and to hunt and defend this clan, even with your life?" Rusty swallowed, flicking his dark ginger tipped-tail, before nodding.

"I promise." Bluestar nodded, the silver-blue she-cat's eyes flitting over the assembled cats.

"Runningwind. You haven't had an apprentice yet, but I believe it's time. You're a fast and strong warrior, and an excellent tracker. I trust you will pass your skills onto this new ThunderClan apprentice."

The lean, light brown padded forward, excitement bouncing off of his pelt. "Yes! I mean—" he lowered his voice slightly, dipping his head to Bluestar. "Yes. I will... do that."

Runningwind padded toward Rusty, a purr coming from the thin-faced tom. His green eyes glowed, clearly communicating that he couldn't wait.

"In that case," Bluestar announced, whiskers twitching, "Rusty, until you become a warrior, you will be known as Firepaw, because of your fiery coat."

Rusty looked down to his paws and nearly jumped out of his pelt. By the lazy rays of light that only just came over the trees, his fur

had turned a fiery orange color, glowing in the light. He looked up to see the clan cheering his name, and couldn't help but beam. *Firepaw.* The name, he decided, was really his own.

Firepaw's eyes flitted to Runningwind's face, his own emerald matching his new... what was it? Boss? Master? No, mentor! His own green gaze met his new mentor's own, the older tom padding forward. "Touch your nose to mine," the tabby whispered, to which Firepaw complied.

Tommy sat a few tail-lengths away, staring up at Bluestar expectantly. "As for you," Bluestar spoke finally, tearing her gaze away from Runningwind and Firepaw, "do you promise to fight and hunt for ThunderClan, even to your last breath? And to follow the warrior code?"

Tommy gave a quick nod. "I do." Bluestar's tail briefly rested on the rock behind her, before she nodded back, eyes darting up to the sky before back to him.

"From this moment onward, you will be called Cloverpaw, after your eyes. Until you earn your warrior name, this is what you will be called. Your new mentor will be Mousefur. Mousefur, you are an excellent hunter, not unlike Runningwind, and StarClan knows we need more hunters in ThunderClan. I trust you'll pass your skills down to Cloverpaw." With that, Cloverpaw touched his nose to the light brown she-cat's.

To Firepaw's surprise, the clan began to cheer on their names, over and over until finally dying out. Graypaw bounded up to him, excitement having replaced the sadness from before. "Hey! Congratulations! Finally an apprentice, huh?" He boxed the air excitedly before dropping down once more. "You're gonna love it."

A grin sidled onto Firepaw's face. "Thanks! Sure hope I do."

"You got this," Graypaw said confidently. "In fact—"

"Firepaw! Cloverpaw! Get your tails over here," a low growl sounded from across the clearing, in front of the High Rock. Tigerclaw's thick tail flicked back and forth, and Firepaw felt his

fur stand on end as he padded forward.

"Yes?" Tommy—no, Cloverpaw—asked casually, trotting towards the tom.

"This," Longtail—one of the toms who had said no to the two joining the clan earlier—leapt forward, claws unsheathed, and attacked Cloverpaw.

"Tommy!" Firepaw cried, completely forgetting his new name and leaping forward himself.

"Stop," Runningwind mewed quietly from beside him and Firepaw stopped a few tail-lengths short of where he had meant to be.

"What!? Longface just—attacked my brother!"

Runningwind's whiskers twitched despite the gravity of Firepaw's claim. "Let him fight him himself. If you jump in, you'll make it even harder for our clanmates to trust you."

Firepaw plopped down beside his mentor, watching the fight carefully. Cloverpaw had rolled over onto his back, trying to get Longtail off. His eyes were wild and he thrashed out, trying to get away.

He turned one side to another, trying to get Longtail off, before finally managing to flip, leaping up to his paws, and choosing that moment to strike.

Longtail yowled. "My tail!" he cried, trying to shake Cloverpaw's hold, thrashing his tail and whipping around. Cloverpaw let go after a moment, his own half-a-tail thrashing indignantly.

"Could've given me a warning, at least," he muttered before stalking away to Mousefur, who looked to be holding back laughter, along with half of the rest of the clan. His green collar laid on the ground in front of the High Rock, and Runningwind nudged Firepaw to go forward and prove himself.

Padding forward somewhat hesitantly, Firepaw surveyed the cats, wondering who would leap out at him. He flicked his own tail,

seeing a figure out of the corner of his eye. He turned, catching the large tabby with full force.

With a grunt he fell to the ground, trying to squirm off and away. "First rule of being a warrior," Tigerclaw growled, loud enough for the clan to hear. "Never turn your back on your enemy. They may claw you in the back."

Pinning Firepaw down, Tigerclaw began to rake his unsheathed claws against his soft belly fur. *Think!* he heard Butter's voice sound in his mind, and he went limp.

Don't not act! the voice sounded again, but he willed it to quiet. A malicious laugh came from Tigerclaw. "I told you a kittypet isn't fit to be a warrior." Firepaw's stomach burnt, and he imagined the blood from his wounds... *okay. Never mind. Stop imagining blood. But now's your time to act!*

He leapt up, and before Tigerclaw could turn around, Firepaw leapt at the warrior, sinking his teeth into his shoulder and digging his claws into the warrior's thick pelt as quickly as he could. Tigerclaw shook his shoulders, rearing up onto his hind paws and trying to shake Firepaw off.

Firepaw heard Graypaw talking to Sandpaw. "Maybe he should be called Fire*grip,"* he announced, eliciting a scoff from Sandpaw.

"You kidding me? He's doing it all wrong." Firepaw gave a chuckle, and his guard disappeared slightly. It was a moment of triumph for Tigerclaw.

The tabby tom shook Firepaw off, and the two circled eachother. "Not bad. For a *kittpet,"* Tigerclaw hissed, amber eyes slitted.

Firepaw summoned all his sarcasm. "Looks like a bad bite on your shoulder there. That's rule number one of being a warrior, you know. Never turn your back on an enemy."

Tigerclaw let out a screech and leapt at him. Firepaw tried to dodge, only to find the tom's unusually long claws entangled in his own thicker pelt. Tigerclaw latched his teeth around Firepaw's

collar, cutting off his air supply.

Must... get... air... he struggled to think. He swiped out a claw at Tigerclaw, catching the tom's face, drawing blood. He struggled, turning to the side, his own muzzle inches from Tigerclaw's face. He kicked off with his hind legs, pushing himself away from Tigerclaw, and with a final snap, freeing himself from his collar.

Tigerclaw stared down at the broken band in his teeth and dropped it. He looked up just to see Firepaw bowling into him.

Somehow, Firepaw managed to pin the tom down, and raised a paw up to slash. The tom's face held an insuppressable smirk, his amber eyes glinting angrily. He hooked a claw in a new tangle of fur near Firepaw's shoulder and tugged him down to his level.

The tom's hot breath blew into his ear as he spoke, and a shock of surprise jolted Firepaw backward.

"Welcome back, Firestar."

Chapter 6

[image]

It had been maybe two weeks since Firepaw had started training. Runningwind was a great mentor, as far as Firepaw's standards went. Not that he *knew,* personally, of any other mentors... but that was beside the point.

The light brown tabby wasn't exactly what Firepaw would call patient—he had initially expected Firepaw to know how to do everything Graypaw did when he was an apprentice. "Graypaw knew how to distinguish between smells," he'd say, making Firepaw's fur lift in annoyance.

"I'm not Graypaw!" exclaimed Firepaw one day, after Runningwind had said it for the thousandth time. The muscular tom was mildly surprised at the outburst, green eyes blinking at the exclamation.

"Right. But you *are* a ThunderClan apprentice, are you not?"

Firepaw didn't want to correct him by telling him he was only *half* ThunderClan, so he merely nodded, receiving a nod from the muscular warrior. "Let's start from the beginning," he said, lean face leaving Firepaw to figure out what he was thinking. "What smells can you catch?"

Firepaw sat down in the middle of the training hollow, closing his emerald eyes and looking up at the azure sky. He opened his mouth slightly, the comforting scents of the forest wafting around him. Faint cherry scents came from the maples, while the oaks—which was what the forest was mainly made up of, according to Runningwind—emitted a sort of earthy smell, keeping Firepaw grounded as he explored the forest with his senses. The scent of a mouse came from not far off—maybe under the roots of a tree around a clearing—and despite being able to hear a squirrel's chittering, he was also able to *smell* the soon-to-be meal. "Trees," he finally said, to which he received a *harumph* from Runningwind. He clarified. "Oaks and maples. And... there's a mouse over there and a

few squirrels up in that tree right there."

When Firepaw opened his eyes, Runningwind nodded, satisfaction in his mentor's gaze. "Very good. That adjures our training today. Go back to camp and get some prey."

With that, Runningwind turned, stalking out of the clearing. *Clearly, he has somewhere to be,* Firepaw thought, watching the muscular warrior walk away.

A clearing of some cat's throat came from behind Firepaw, causing him to jump two tail-lengths in the air, landing on his feet in the light covering of leaves, emitting a soft thud. "Good to see you have balance," the dark brown tabby said, giving Firepaw a once-over. *Tigerclaw.*

The big tom had been increasingly interested in him since the fight —which Runningwind didn't talk about—and had sought him out to talk to him specifically more than once. Firepaw found himself licking his chest before straightening up. "That's right," the flame-colored tom said, trying to sound mature. "I've got the balance of a... cat."

Not a flicker of amusement made itself known in Tigerclaw's gaze. "I've come to talk to you about your progress in training."

Firepaw blinked, shoulders going slack, wrapping his lightly tabbied tail over his paws. "What do you mean? Runningwind's my mentor."

Tigerclaw seemed to choose his words carefully. "Yes, but ThunderClan needs more warriors... more battle-ready ones, that is. Runningwind is a fine warrior, but I find his battle skills... lacking. That is not to say he's not loyal, but you can do better."

Firepaw tried to figure out how to interpret the tom's words. Sensing his confusion, Tigerclaw continued. "Don't you want to be seen as a strong warrior of ThunderClan? Wouldn't it be better to be seen as that rather than cowardly? You don't want the reputation of being a kittypet for the rest of your... daylight warrior time, do you?" The word didn't seem right coming from Tigerclaw's mouth, and his persuasion didn't, either, but Firepaw couldn't put his paw

on how exactly.

"I've come to make you an offer," Tigerclaw continued, this time staring deep into Firepaw's eyes, unblinking. A sign of dominance, of power. Firepaw wasn't about to blink.

"If you wish to be a strong ThunderClan warrior, I can train you. I have a few stronger warriors in ThunderClan that I'm a close acquaintance to, and I'm sure they wouldn't miss out on training the new and upcoming... star of ThunderClan."

It brought back memories of the two's duel. *Firestar. I'm not Firestar... I'm only Fire*paw.

"But if you wish to be a great warrior," the dark tom said, unpausing, pale amber eyes searing Firepaw's emerald ones, "you must train hard. It would be more training than the other apprentices. More training, I'm sure, than your own mentor had. But, it would make you a great asset to ThunderClan."

He finally stopped talking, still holding Firepaw's gaze. It took a few minutes, but Firepaw nodded finally. It was his big chance to prove himself. "Alright. I'll give it a try. Can Graypaw come, too?"

Tigerclaw's ear flicked, a look of distaste crossing the warrior's face before he shook his head. "Graypaw is not ready. When he is, I will make the same invitation. But for now... you are a new apprentice, not only to ThunderClan, but in learning elite battle moves."

With that, the burly tom essentially melted into the trees, disappearing before Firepaw's eyes. "... Whoa," he whispered, watching the spot the huge tom had been, eyes huge.

"Hey, Firepaw!"

Firepaw once more jumped, though not as high, claws immediately becoming unsheathed as he turned around in the leaf-littered training hollow.

"Whoa there, don't claw my ears off! I've only got one pair," the good-natured gray apprentice said, giving a grin. Firepaw couldn't help but wonder if he had heard what Tigerclaw said about him.

But from the big, round, yellow eyes of his friend... he came to the conclusion that he hadn't.

"Runningwind said you'd be back soon!" Graypaw exclaimed cheerfully, trotting over a bit, shaggy pelt shaking with each pawstep, "But I figured I'd come out here and remind you."

Firepaw couldn't help but chuckle at his friend's comment. "Thanks, Graypaw. Anything good on the fresh-kill pile?" Graypaw thought a moment.

"Well, Tommy—I mean, Cloverpaw, I'm still getting the hang of his new name caught a frog today. So I guess that'll be an experience." Graypaw's face was slack, although the faintest trace of disgust crept across his muzzle.

"Yuck," Firepaw said, wrinkling his nose at the thought of the squelchy slime of the little hopping creature.... *And this is why I will never join ShadowClan.*

"But I bet there's other stuff! Runningwind always catches the best stuff."

"Wait... but Runningwind was just training with me—" Firepaw began, stopping his words when Graypaw met his gaze, eyes sympathetic.

"He's a really fast hunter, that's all. You're lucky to be his apprentice." *I bet Graypaw knew how to hunt fast when he became an apprentice, too.* Graypaw's next words made him feel guilty for that thought. "You'll get better in no time, though! When I first became an apprentice, I didn't know the difference between a vole and a shrew." He gave a rueful laugh. "Learned that one pretty fast," he said, and for the first time, Firepaw noticed a tiny scratch just over the tom's pinkish nose.

"Yeah..." Firepaw trailed off just as they got to the top of the ThunderClan camp.

Graypaw peered off and over the walls of the ravine and into the small valley below that made up the camp. From his time in the

camp, Firepaw had learned where a few things were. Most obvious was the High Rock, which sat near the center of the camp, large and dark gray, jutting up into the air.

The medicine den was second most obvious, with its frond-surrounded clearing and the large, fluttering, willow jutting out of its top. The fronds of the tree were mostly bare, given that it was near the end of leaf-fall, but the fronds swayed gently in the wind nonetheless.

The rest of the dens were more or less the same inside; the outside was what Firepaw used to differentiate. The apprentices' den was under a fallen log—which Firepaw had successfully identified as a maple, thanks to Runningwind's odd tree knowledge—and was in listening distance of the elders, so it really wasn't a reliable place to tell secrets. According to Graypaw, that is. The other ones weren't really important, but they existed, and because they had nothing to do with Firepaw, Graypaw had assured him he would learn.

The two traversed the rocky slopes and into camp, and Firepaw couldn't help but feel relief as his paws touched the tall grass at the bottom. Following Graypaw's lead, he padded to the fresh-kill pile, picking out a mouse about the same size as his friend's for himself.

They sat in the sun, saying nothing, but eating, Firepaw staring at everything with wide eyes, still trying to get used to the camp. He had gone back and forth between his housefolk and ThunderClan—always receiving dirty looks from his clanmates when he did—but for the most part had been in-camp.

The mouse was good. He had had a lot of prey—home-caught, real-life, sometimes still-warm, prey—in the past couple of days and very rarely ate the pellets his housefolk gave him. The bowl was nothing compared to mice.

From the medicine den trotted Cloverpaw, catching sight of his brother and friend and grabbing a vole off the top of the pile. "Hi," he said, settling down next to Firepaw and tucking into his vole. "How was training?"

Graypaw shrugged. "It was good. Lionheart's tough," he glanced

around, looking for the maned tabby but caught no sign of him, "but a good mentor. I've got a couple battle moves down and I'm ready to attack ShadowClan!" This last statement attracted a few glances from various warriors who were sharing tongues, or the elders who were reliving their glory days, but they quickly got back to their activities.

"What about you?" Cloverpaw asked Firepaw, taking another bite of his vole. "Dihf yew flern bahhle moofes?"

Firepaw shook his head. "No, I was working on catching scents. Runningwind says it's extra important for hunting." He left out the last part of his mentor's quote: *especially if you haven't been trained before*. "Heard you got some hunting in today, though."

A sheepish look crossed the brown-and-white patched tabby's face. "A frog," he said, giving a little grin.

"That's great! Where'd you catch it?" Graypaw asked conversationally, beginning to draw his paw over his muzzle, having finished his mouse.

"Near the nursery. You'd be surprised how many frogs there are over there. Almost like a ShadowClan camp," said Cloverpaw, tossing the words out casually.

Sandpaw padded past the trio. "You really shouldn't joke about ShadowClan like that. They might claw your face off when we go to the next Gathering." A sly look came onto her face, but she quickly subdued it. "It's new-moon, though, s the next Gathering's in, like, fourteen days. Talking about ShadowClan like that brings bad luck. Or worse—the Shadowed Menace."

Cloverpaw gave her a blank stare while all of the color seemed to drain from Graypaw's face. It was apparent even beneath the thick fur, and he swallowed.

"What's the Shadowed Menace? I thought you guys didn't use 'menace' as a warrior name?" Firepaw asked, knowing full-well it wasn't a warrior name. Sandpaw huffed indignantly, and he knew the conversation from a few days earlier had crossed her mind.

"Well—no! But it's a name. Like 'destroyer of kits' or 'rescuer of poor, defenseless kittypets' or something like that."

Firepaw couldn't help but smile a little at her spluttering explanation, but nodded for her to continue. "So who is this Menacepaw?"

Sandpaw glared at him. "The Shadowed Menace. He lurks around camps, ready to attack anyone who's not ShadowClan. He's the biggest cat you ever saw. Two cats' normal height, fur blacker than water on a moonless night. Everything about him is dark. His fur makes him look even bigger, until he's three full-grown cats' height. His claws are as black as ice on the Thunderpath, and he's the best at hunting. His nose is more powerful than a thousand LionClan hunters, and his ears are better than twenty of the warriors of old's. His eyes are the only thing that aren't black." She moved closer, lowering her voice, green eyes wide and captivating. "His eyes are brighter orange than marigold. They shine like the sun, and pierce your soul. They're the only source for miles on a new moon night. And if you look at them... you... EXPLODE!" The ferocity of the she-cat's yowl, combined with her leap forward at Firepaw as if she were going to claw him made all three apprentices scramble back in slight fear. Sandpaw let out a cackle of laughter, tossing her head knowingly, confident air about her. Firepaw found himself glaring at her... although he wasn't really *mad.* It was confident.

Graypaw glared at her. "That wasn't funny, Sandpaw!"

"On contraire, dear Graypaw," the sandy she-cat spoke fluidly, smirk playing on her muzzle. "It was hysterical." Her demeanor brightened, and there was a new bounce to her step. "Sleep well tonight!" With that, she bounced off to find Dustpaw, probably to plot some more.

Firepaw finished the last bite of his mouth and looked between Cloverpaw and Graypaw. "You guys weren't really scared by Sandpaw's stories, were you?" he asked, feeling like a ThunderClan veteran asking that question.

Graypaw's yellow eyes were big and wide. "Nope. Not scared at all."

Cloverpaw echoed the statement. "Why would I be scared? Sandpaw's such a funny cat. Haha. Super hysterical. Always joking 'round like that."

Firepaw wasn't convinced. The sun was setting, though, and fast. He knew he had to wake up super early for tomorrow's training. He was certain Tigerclaw would get him before dawn... and he didn't want to be tired for that.

"I guess I'll be getting to sleep, then," he said, starting off. Immediately, Graypaw stuck to him like glue.

"I'll stay with you! Gotta protect you from... Sandpaw... anyways."

Cloverpaw trailed behind Graypaw nodding quickly in agreement. "Yup! Can't let that nasty she-cat get cha."

And so, Firepaw found himself in his den, brother on one side, Graypaw on the other, each pretending to snore as they stayed awake late into the night.

There was a rustling of ferns at the entrance of the den, and Firepaw's eyes opened. There loomed a dark figure, the distance making it seem smaller than it actually was. Its eyes were closed, but that only made it all the more menacing.

Like an explosion, its eyes opened, amber-orange, and Firepaw gave a grin. Beside him, Graypaw screeched, Cloverpaw let out a cry, and Firepaw closed his eyes as Dustpaw came into the den. He was sure he could save ThunderClan now.

Chapter 7

[image]

The badger was big and black and had seven rows of razor-sharp teeth. It was taller than the trees, its black-and-white form bulky yet thin. Its eyes glistened in the light, and it directed its huge paw towards the fire-colored apprentice, swinging it with such ferocity Firepaw knew he would be knocked over, ending only with a prod to the side.

Ow...

Another prod. "Wake up, mouse-brain," the creature growled, and Firepaw realized he was dreaming. His eyes snapped open to see Dustpaw standing in front of him, the corners of the older tom's mouth tugging downwards in an annoyed frown. "Took you long enough," he *harumphed* before turning on his tail and gesturing with his head for Firepaw to follow him.

Quickly stretching, Firepaw squeezed out of the space between Cloverpaw and Graypaw, shaking out his fur at the entrance. The sun wasn't even up, and the pre-dawn glow up above the walls of the ravine was the only source of light for the whole camp.

Trotting after the mud-colored tom, Firepaw was brimming with excitement, and he couldn't help but imagine how excited Cloverpaw would've been if he could've come... still, Cloverpaw hadn't really been a fighter. Despite how antagonistic he could be, he wasn't really the claws-out, teeth-ready type of cat.

"Do you guys often do this kind of meeting?" he asked the older tom, inclining his head slightly due to the height difference.

Dustpaw gave a half-shrug, seemingly not fully awake... but Firepaw suspected it had something to do with Dustpaw's disliking him. "Depends. I haven't been an apprentice for much longer than Graypaw, so I don't know all of the details, but we've had meetings seven or eight times already.

Whoa. "Seven or eight times?" Dustpaw merely nodded. "What do you do at the meetings?" Firepaw inquired, following behind the tom as he climbed up the path at the side of the ravine.

The brown tom narrowed his eyes at Firepaw. "Do you *have* to ask so many questions? You'll see soon enough." With that, he disappeared through the tunnel, bounding just within Firepaw's sight in the direction of the Great Sycamore.

The tree stretched up and up, seeming to barely miss the stars. Its leaves were mostly strewn on the ground now, only a few stuck to the branches. Tigerclaw sat at the foot of the oak, talking to Longtail, how started when he saw Firepaw.

"Dustpaw! You let him follow you?"

Dustpaw glared at the pale tabby. "No! Tigerclaw told me to take him."

Darkstripe emerged from a crevice just under the tree, nestled in its roots and blinked a few times upon seeing Firepaw, but said nothing, yellow eyes only narrowing at the sight of him.

"Glad you could make it," Tigerclaw said in his baritone voice, nodding in something that looked a little bit like welcome. "Today Darkstripe will be teaching you and Dustpaw battle moves—specifically against WindClan."

Firepaw nodded, and Darkstripe stalked forward, beginning to pace. "WindClan. Fast, small, and skinny. Battle moves that would work against ShadowClan, for example, will not work with those rabbit-brains." Firepaw eyed Dustpaw, trying to read his thoughts as to what the dark gray tabby had just said, but he betrayed nothing but interest.

"Usually, WindClan cats turn and run—they are cowards. But when they do not, it is essential to know their tactics." His yellow gaze settled on Dustpaw. "Attack me."

The apprentice leapt at Darkstripe, paws outstretched. He was obviously aiming for the tom's eyes, but he ducked easily. Dustpaw

dissolved into a roll, springing up and facing Darkstripe, circling him. Darkstripe was at peace, unconcerned, turning as Dustpaw circled him.

Dustpaw leapt again, this time falling a bit short, diving under the tom's belly, and instead of clawing, kicking as hard as he could. Darkstripe's eyes widened and he quickly reared onto his hind legs, smacking Dustpaw's shoulder with an unsheathed claw.

"Ow!" Dustpaw cried, immediately rolling up onto his paws. "I thought we weren't using claws!"

"That will teach you," Darkstripe drawled, a snarl coming into his voice, "not to try to seriously harm your opponent."

Dustpaw narrowed his eyes. "At least my move worked," he muttered stalking off to the side. Darkstripe sprang at the turned back of Dustpaw, and Firepaw barely had time to register it. He sprang at Darkstripe, knocking him off kilter and giving Dustpaw a chance to spin around.

Firepaw hadn't been training for long, but he knew how to claw. Kind of. He gripped onto the tom's back, sinking his still kit-like claws into the short fur of Darkstripe's coat. Darkstripe growled, a deep, menacing, sound, from the back of his throat and hurled up onto his back paws, shaking his shoulders, throwing Firepaw off.

Dustpaw reared up onto his own back paws, locking together with Darkstripe. Firepaw's emerald eyes darted over to Tigerclaw, whose gaze gave away nothing, begging, mentally, for help. He sprang up, side sore given the fact that he had hit the ground moments earlier, looking for a spot to jump in.

The two wrestled, caterwauls coming from both, each tottering dangerously on their back paws. *Their back paws...* Firepaw slithered forward like a snake, hooking his front paws around Darkstripe's legs, and yanking hard, taking his paws out from beneath him.

Darkstripe yelped, tumbling down, reaching out for Firepaw and catching the back of his ear, near the tip. Firepaw hissed, pulling back, and gave a reciprocating slice of his claws... catching only air.

Longtail stood between him and Darkstripe, Dustpaw a few tail-lengths away, crouched down low to the ground and glaring at Darkstripe. His angry amber gaze seared into Tigerclaw's pelt, seeming to demandingly scream *How could you!*

Firepaw looked between the two, feeling Longtail's own gaze burning into his coat but ignoring it, looking to see Tigerclaw's reaction.

The large, dark brown, tom padded forward nimbly, looking at the skid marks where the fighting cats' paws had dug into the ground and pulled up dust in slight annoyance. "Good work, Darkstripe." Dustpaw seemed to have had his ears boxed because he nearly fell backwards at Tigerclaw's praise of his attacker.

"But—" he began but stopped at the silencing, disciplinary, look of Tigerclaw.

"Dustpaw, Darkstripe was your enemy in this situation. *Never* turn your back on your enemy."

Images flooded Firepaw's mind of the fight from the day before between himself and Tigerclaw, and he swallowed, shaking the thoughts from his mind quickly. Dustpaw gave a somewhat annoyed, yet submissive sigh.

"Fine," he grunted, and Tigerclaw's light amber eyes turned to Firepaw. Firepaw couldn't help but stand up straighter under his critiquing look, unable to wither away, even though his senses told him to run and get out of the clearing as fast as possible.

"Yes?" he asked after a moment when Tigerclaw didn't say anything.

"Good double-fighting. But fix your form." With that, the conversation was over, and Tigerclaw turned around, starting back towards camp.

"That's... that's it?" Firepaw asked, dropping back to walk beside Dustpaw, incredulously watching Tigerclaw's hackles as he put one paw in front of the other.

Dustpaw shrugged, although something seemed to have

begrudgingly changed between the two. "It's unpredictable. But Tigerclaw says a good warrior never acts in a pre-planned way. Not so that the enemy can tell, at least."

Firepaw tilted his head at that, left in silence to think about it. Dustpaw glanced from side to side as they came up on the camp, making sure nobody saw them re-enter, then ushered Firepaw forward with his tail, taking up the rear of the small patrol.

Firepaw climbed into a nest a tail-length away from Graypaw and Cloverpaw (they had stretched out into his nest and now he had nowhere to curl up unless he wanted to wake them), and drifted to sleep almost immediately. When he woke up, a light drizzle had fallen over the camp, the ground was moist, not just from dew, but from the light rain, and it was something like dawn.

A massive yawn came from Firepaw's muzzle before he could stop himself, and he found himself slinking out of the nest... just to be met by Sandpaw. Her muzzle was inches from his own and her green eyes glared, distrust deep in them, as if suspecting him of high crimes.

"Where. Were. You. Last. Night." Firepaw blinked. He hadn't been prepared for any lines of questioning and Dustpaw wasn't anywhere to save him.

"Um. Why do you ask?" he questioned back, trying to figure out a response as fast as he could. It wasn't working. Sandpaw's immediate pacing didn't help.

"When I woke up in the middle of the night, you weren't there. You were gone for an hour, at the *very* least."

"I was using the dirt-place," Firepaw tried to cover up, hastily coming up with responses off the top of his head.

"That explains it then. You used the secret tunnel. What were you doing out there, kittypet? Betraying us to ShadowClan? Turning us in to your two-legs? Forsaking the life of a warrior for that of a low-life rogue?" With each accusation, Sandpaw grew closer, until she was right in front of him, not even a whisker-length away.

From across the clearing came Whitestorm's call. "Sandpaw!" he beckoned, voice deep and baritone, echoing without needing to. Sandpaw whirled around, sandy, ginger-ticked coat spiking at her mentor's voice, probably because she wasn't supposed to be threatening the newcomer.

In a second, she turned on her heel, glaring at Firepaw, spat out, "I'm onto you, kitty-face," and dashed off like a very good and studious, if not slightly biased, apprentice. That left Firepaw alone, standing and waiting for Runningwind.

The tom came maybe fifteen minutes later, and even then, was pretty distracted. "Firepaw! There you are. Sorry I'm... late." His mind was elsewhere, and Firepaw couldn't help but wonder where.

"Yeah... not a problem."

"Anyways, today I was thinking we could practice battle moves." Firepaw's eyes lit up, and Runningwind finally seemed to focus. Leading him into the forest, his mentor quickly explained everything he needed to know before the lesson. "Battle moves are the most important skill, maybe even more important than hunting, that a warrior has to know. It's how we defend our clan, how we make sure everyone is okay. Healing is good... but defending is better."

That was how he had introduced a new move, which he called the hook and grab. It was where a cat—in that situation, Firepaw—slithered forward, not unlike how he had done the night before, and hooked his paws around his opponent's front paws. The action, if done correctly, yanked the cat down, giving the attacker a good springboard for where to go next, whether it be a leap up onto the opponent's back or a side-strike, the latter of which Runningwind promised he would teach Firepaw the next lesson.

As the night fell, Firepaw found himself falling asleep very, very, easily. His eyes seemed to have had no muscles, and his paws had fallen away, as if someone had hooked and grabbed them out from below him. Which, of course, Runningwind had done throughout the training session. As the stars came out, the clouds ever so slowly drifting away, Firepaw thought he heard rustling and movement

from the warriors' den as if some cats were getting up to go someplace, to do who-knew-what. As if they were on a secret stealth mission or something. But Firepaw couldn't care less; he was exhausted, and he knew Runningwind had to be, too.

Chapter 8

[image]

Firepaw wasn't sure what was going on with Runningwind. His best guess? He was tired. The usually overly energetic, and somewhat impatient, warrior seemed to always have something else on his mind, whether it be fresh-kill—or, more recently—sleep. The unkempt tom came into training late, tail dragging, eyes weary.

Despite his sleepiness, however, he was an excellent teacher, concerning hunting at least. He had taught Firepaw tons of hunting moves, which meant that his first solo hunting mission came quickly.

It was a sunny day, warmer than it had been in ages, and Firepaw was assigned hunting near the Owl Tree. Dashing off into the woods—and keenly aware of his mentor leaping through the mostly-barren trees above—he made his way there, lightly avoiding the largest leaf deposits. The large oak loomed up above the ginger apprentice, who suddenly felt very small. Circling around the trunk and looking up into the boughs of the great oak, he could spot several types of birds. Magpies, thrushes, wood pigeons, blackbirds, and a few he wasn't sure even Runningwind would be able to identify, sat in the tree, hopping from branch to branch, chirping and calling out to one another. Squirrels scurried up the trunk, reaching their tiny paws out to twigs that looked like they could barely hold their weight, and making a move to the next limb. Even though it was leaf-fall, it was plentiful.

And so, finding a good paw-hold, he started up. One paw after the other, whiskers quivering at the scents that wafted into his nose. The birds helpfully stayed away, but the squirrels seemed to almost taunt him, daring him to catch them. *Oh, I will.*

Five tail-lengths off the ground, he sighted his first victim: a wood mouse, much higher than they were usually found. The wind was blowing towards him, swaying the branches slightly, but Firepaw wasn't worried—Runningwind had trained him in the art of

climbing.

They had practiced, bark after bark, limb after limb, and had successfully tackled all of the trees ringing the training hollow. They had moved on to the ones near the top of the gorge, near the camp, and had conquered those with ease. The Owl Tree was just the final monster, the largest hare to catch.

Firepaw stepped lightly, claws digging into the rough bark of the tree. The mouse sat up, a berry in its paws—if Cloverpaw was to be believed, a blackberry—and looked to its left and its right, freezing Firepaw in his tracks. It didn't look back, though; its fatal flaw.

Without warning, Firepaw leapt, a beam of sun catching his fur. To anyone watching, it would've looked like a bolt of fire engulfing the mouse. Careful to drop the mouse into a pile of densely-gathered leaves at the bottom of the tree, Firepaw continued on, licking his lips, having tasted a bit of the creature when he'd caught it. Sending a silent prayer up to StarClan as he dragged himself up higher, his emerald eyes darted from one bough to another, trying to decide what he would catch.

A small magpie landed near his ear as he was dragging himself up, around fifteen tail-lengths up from the ground by then. The bird chattered, voice hoarse, but not as hoarse as a crow's. It was clearly a male, by its growing green feathers, but it wasn't mature. Runningwind had very strict rules about these ones: don't attack. They would lead you to others. And so, Firepaw ignored the bird, who hopped away, its incandescent cawing still filling the air, alongside the cacophony of other bird cries.

Hefting himself up onto the branch the magpie had disappeared on, he found a sight worth waiting a million years: birds lined up as if waiting for him to pounce. The first one was a great catch: large, plump, and a wood pigeon. Goldenflower would be pleased—she was with kits and needed to keep up her energy. Tigerclaw wouldn't be too happy, but at least his mate would be fed. After the wood pigeon, a sparrow pecked at a little knot in the wood. Firepaw wasn't sure what it was doing—a lot of the birds had flown away, having been disturbed by the flame-colored tom, but the sparrow was looking for something. Without hesitation, Firepaw leapt,

slamming his paws down on the bird and delivering two prayers up to StarClan, not just for the sparrow, but for the wood pigeon, too.

Carefully turning around, Firepaw dropped the sparrow onto the leaf pile and made his way down the tree. That was enough to feed at least four cats. It was simple, and he was sure he had passed his first test as a ThunderClan apprentice.

And then he saw it: a large, gray, squirrel, glaring at him. He gave chase. He was steady on his paws and reached out for the squirrel once or twice, missing, but continued on.

The two zig-zagged through the rough gray boughs of the tree. Up and down they went until the squirrel disappeared into a hole a few tail-lengths from the ground.

From nowhere, Runningwind leapt out of the underbrush, delivering a killing bite. Firepaw hopped down from the tree, landing on his feet as always, not needing to roll. "Good catch, Runningwind!"

The tabby tom swished his tail, giving a grin. "You kidding me? LionClan couldn't've caught two birds in a row. Good hunting."

Firepaw grinned back. He wasn't sure if mentors and apprentices usually had this kind of odd relationship; Runningwind was more a friend or a brother than a teacher, which, it seemed from watching Graypaw and Lionheart and Sandpaw and Whitestorm, they were.

Runningwind looked up at the bright azure sky, taking note of where the sun was. "Did you get to see from the top?"

The apprentice shook his head. "No... I was busy doing my assessment." Runningwind nodded, looking up at the top of the tree.

"Well, you passed. Congrats. Let's bury that fresh-kill and climb to the top—the view's fantastic." With that, his mentor bounded off faster than Firepaw had seen him do in days—he did seem to have been getting more sleep lately—and started scraping at the ground, throwing up dust and clods of dirt in the process. Firepaw trotted over to his fresh-kill, grabbing the mouse and the sparrow in his

mouth and dropping them in the hole, then going back for the wood pigeon, Runningwind grabbing the mean, gray, squirrel. Scraping the upturned dirt over the fresh-kill, Firepaw watched as his mentor practically ran up the tree.

His jaw dropped. "You can run up trees like that!?" Runningwind shrugged from his perch on a limb.

"Momentum. Just have to go fast enough. Also, don't run at it head-first, make sure you give it a little jump."

Firepaw backed up, reading to run at the tree full-speed. Six tail-lengths away, he sprinted. The roots that poked out of the ground near the base loomed closer and closer, and then Firepaw jumped, clutching onto the trunk for dear life. His paws were spread too far out and he felt a bit like a kit out on the ice, paws splayed, somewhat helpless.

"Need some help?" Runningwind asked, barely a mouse-length above him, whiskers twitching in slight amusement.

The fiery apprentice could only shake his head. "Nope... I've got it," he grunted, carefully pulling his left paw in, and then his right. Summoning his power, he hauled himself up onto the limb Runningwind sat calmly on, ears burning with embarrassment.

Runningwind, sensing Firepaw's unease, nudged him with a smile. "Not bad for a first try. Next time, try to keep your paws in, like this." He moved his front paws closer together. "And when you do the jumping part, you'll be tempted to drag your body all the way out, to cover more air-space. Bad idea. Bunch your body together, and you'll get higher. We can practice jumping next session. But first... the view."

Runningwind clawed up the tree, graceful as a squirrel. He wove through the limbs, bypassing the sharp bits of twig that were uncovered by leaf-fall, slithering between the closer-together branches, then peered down at Firepaw with raised brows. "You coming? Or you wanna watch the leaves fall down there?"

Firepaw cautiously followed after his mentor, paw after paw. Soon,

he got into a familiar rhythm. Like he was meant to climb trees forever, his claws automatically found the cracks in the wood, and, copying his mentor, kept his body bunched together and as small as possible. While it took some getting used to, he found that the smaller his torso was, the easier it was to reach from bough to bough.

He grasped at the limbs, pulling himself up easily enough, digging in his claws into the dark gray wood. He leapt from branch to branch soon enough, finding sturdy branches as quickly as breathing, the exhileration coursing through his body, like the slight breeze that blew through the branches. He wasn't afraid, he was excited, and went higher and higher, finally reaching Runningwind.

The branches had thinned out up at the top, and only the smallest of leaves remained on the tiny twigs. From the top, he could see everything. He could see Sunning Rocks—a few ThunerClan elders stretched out on the warm stones—and the river next to it. He could see onto RiverClan land, past the banks, and onto their watery-looking land. The Thunderpath was huge and black and ugly, cutting through the natural terrain, and even from up in the oak, he could scent it. Fourtrees loomed up in the distance, surrounded by a moat of soon-to-freeze water, and ShadowClan marsh was frostbitten and a dead brown-yellow color. A huge ravine was just in front of him, and he felt like he could reach out a paw and stir up the water within it. The falls seemed only a whisker-length away, and he wanted to dam it up with a pebble. WindClan's moor stretched as far as the eye could see to the left, and behind him, a blanket of interwoven shades of brown made up the forest.

Cats dotted the scenery, coats flecks in the wild painting of nature before Firepaw. Two RiverClan cats crouched at the river, a larger, blue-gray, one teaching a smaller, white-and-brown one how to fish, swiping a glittery piece of the prey into the air. A patrol of ShadowClan cats was at the border, staying well-away from ThunderClan land, from up in the tree, not as evil as everyone made them out to be. If Firepaw strained his ears, he could hear the sounds of the ThunderClan nursery, where Thornkit and Brightkit played chasing Swiftkit, and he could almost smell the comforting,

milky scent of the interior. On WindClan territory, the cats seemed to be few and far between; a patrol of three cats seemed to be hunting, and another two, one black and a tortoiseshell touched noses near the gorge.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" Runningwind finally asked after a minute, staring off into the distance. Firepaw could only nod. It didn't feel right to speak. Eventually, the tan tabby started to move, beginning the long climb down.

Moments passed and Firepaw started down, too, the scene of the territories ingrained in his mind. *If I ever have kits... they're coming up here.* He decided, idle thoughts crossing his mind as he clawed his way down the tree.

At the bottom, he took up the sparrow and squirrel, Runningwind at his side with the mouse and pidgeon, and started for camp. He couldn't wait to see everyone's expressions when he got back with the catch of the moon. Goldenflower would be so happy to see the wood pigeon, she might even accept some of its feathers for her nest! And Brightkit would dig into the mouse excitedly, the little creature tasting slightly of wood. He couldn't wait to see their faces.

When he arrived at camp, however, a far different scene awaited him. The clearing was flecked with cats of all different pelts, scattering splotches of color across the dull, brown, mostly-dead grass. At the center of the clearing, a blood-stained heap of fur laid, brown-and-white tabby pelt barely rising and falling with each breath. Firepaw's heart threatened to stop beating and explode out of his chest at the same time because he knew exactly who that pile of fur was. *Cloverpaw.*

Chapter 9

The brown-and-white body in the middle of camp was stained with blood. The red stuff that was meant to be in his body was out, and it wasn't a pretty picture. The now-stiff grass of leaf-bare was splattered, the browns and reds a terrific contrast, unblending and totally distinct.

Firepaw raced forward, knowing who it was. "Tommy!" he yowled, cats parting out of the flame-colored apprentice's way. His heart pounded faster than he ever thought it could and his emerald eyes were stretched so wide he thought they'd stay like that forever, but he couldn't stop.

He was keenly aware of the crimson liquid on his own paws as he got closer and finally knelt down to his brother. The clover-green eyes of the tom seemed to be clouded over from the pain, though Firepaw knew they didn't change color. "Tommy..." he whispered, breath coming fast. He couldn't afford to care if he was going against tradition by saying his brother's name-his *true* name-and knelt down to see, with relief, that he was still breathing.

"Hey there," Cloverpaw said weakly, "nice of you to drop by." He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again, a prolonged blink that wasn't of trust. It was a bad sign.

"Tommy, what *happened?"* Firepaw asked, heart beating faster once more, the agonizing waiting for his brother's answer stirring it on.

Cloverpaw shrugged. "Ran into a tree. It happens," he mumbled, eyes closing quickly. Despite knowing deep down, somehow, that his brother wouldn't die, he couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency, like it could change if he didn't act fast enough.

Ignoring his brother's attempt at humor, he looked up, finding himself face-to-face with a blue-eyed silver she-cat. "Find Spottedleaf," he said loudly, not realizing until he'd spoken that his voice was thunderous. His ears flattened slightly, and he whispered

a quick sorry, only to realize the she-cat had hared off to the medicne den to get her sister. *Thank StarClan for Willowpelt.*

Spottedleaf was there in an instant. Runningwind dropped the prey Firepaw had left in his haste on the fresh-kill pile before coming over, brows creased.

"What happened?" Spottedleaf asked an instant before Runningwind could. Her pink nose quivered at the smell of blood and she turned to the lean warrior beside her. "Get cobwebs. Middle shelf. Back wall."

Worldlessly, Runningwind dashed off, fast as a breeze, emerging from the den with a jawful of sticky spider webs. Cloverpaw winced as the she-cat applied poltices to his wounds. She glared at a few warrior who were too close. "Give him some air, for StarClan's sake! You wouldn't want some random cat breathing down your neck while you died, would you?" she spat, multitasking and pushing down on his wounds.

She glanced to Firepaw, who was steadily creeping back. "Firepaw, he's not-"

Firepaw didn't wait to hear her finish. *Not what? Dying right now? Losing blood at a life-permitting pace? Going to survive another day?* He turned tail and ran, promptly smacking into Lionheart, who was coming from the nursery, smelling of hare-it must've been Frostfur's breakfast-and kits.

"Firepaw. What's wrong?" The flame-colored apprentice stared up into the golden warrior's eyes, emerald gaze terrified. He backed up once more before tearing out of camp. Up the path. Out the gorse tunnel. Through the woods. And finally... to the fence. The one he had leapt over to get to the forest in the first place. The one that had caused Cloverpaw's possible death. The one that had started it all.

Digging his claws in as hard as he could, he vaulted up onto the narrow path of the structure, not giving himself time to teeter dangerously, making a bee-line for Princess' house. He smacked the cat-flap with his tail, knowing it would get her attention, before

continuing to Filou's house, yowling at him to get Luna, too.

In his yard, the council of Nutmeg's kits (and Smudge) met for a meeting. "So... why are we here?" Princess finally asked, her new salmon-colored collar's bell jingling as she tilted her head to give her chest plume a quick grooming.

Firepaw started pacing. "So I know it's been a while. Maybe a week. But I was walking into camp today and Tommy-actually, at camp we call him Cloverpaw, I don't know what he thinks of his name yet-was laying there bleeding. I think he needs... medicine? Like, real medicine?"

Filou nodded as if it were perfectly reasonable, Smudge blinking his amber eyes, bobbing his head up and down as well. Luna vehemently shook her head, and Princess, who sat beside her, sat up straighter. "But I've heard that the clans are great with herbs!" Luna exclaimed, pale green eyes wide.

Filou rolled his eyes, scoffing. "You've *also* heard that they eat kitens. Which of those do you think is more reasonable?"

"Herbs! No sane cat would eat a kitten."

"Yeah, okay, and Tommy's still got a tail."

"Please! It looks like Rusty-Firepaw now, I guess-has other stuff to say." Princess was great at getting them all on the right track like that.

"Yes! I do. His tail's mostly healed, but what I'm worried about are his claw marks. They look deep, you guys."

Smudge shivered, kneading his claws into the cold ground of the yard. "Claw marks? No thank you, I prefer life."

Filou promptly ignored the black-and-white tom, instead fixing his hazel eyes on Firepaw. "Look, I know you're in love with the clans and all that, but maybe Tommy's *not.* Maybe Tommy needs actual real-life medical attention. This isn't a story, Rusty, this is *real life."*

"And because it's real life, we have to take hold of it! I know I sound

like Cloverpaw, but it's true-if you don't use what you've got now, it'll mold later."

Luna placed a paw forward. "All who are *not* in favor of Tommy getting housefolk medical treatment put a paw forward."

A white paw was placed beside Luna's tortoiseshell, alongside Firepaw's own. Luna sat back onto her haunches. "It's decided. Not so hard after all. Rusty-uh, no, Firepaw-you go back to LightningCamp. Make sure Tommy's okay."

Filou scowled. "This is a *bad idea,* Luna. Even *worse* than showing Rocky where the catnip was."

The tortoiseshell she-cat shrugged. "Look, it was a great idea. It got him out of Princess' fur."

Firepaw's light orange brother shook his head, mumbling under his breath something about how he couldn't understand girls.

From the other side of the fence, a familiar voice sounded. "Uh, Firepaw? You over there?"

Firepaw's ears swivveled to the voice-Graypaw's-and he quickly excused himself, scraping up and onto the top of the fence. "Yeah?" His voice unintentionally cracked. He ruffled his thick fur. "Yeah?" he tried again, deepening his voice on purpose. Graypaw didn't seem to notice.

"Are you... okay?" the deep gray apprentice finally asked, still looking up from where he stood, concern in his yellow eyes. Firepaw hesitated a moment too long.

Graypaw took it upon himself to climb the fence. He clawed his way up, finally standing unstably on the boards. "Whoa! Uh, so, Bluestar wanted me to tell you to come back," he said with a somewhat awkward glance to the siblings.

Firepaw followed his gaze and his emerald eyes brightened. "You've got to meet my family! Come on," and with that, he leapt off the oaken fence and onto the mostly dead, but still soft grass of his yard.

His friend jumped after him, blinking at the sheer number of siblings. "You've got a lot of sibs," he mumbled, looking from one face to another. Firepaw shrugged.

"I don't have a *ton.* I do have some, though. This is Princess, Filou, Luna, and Smudge. Smudge's just a friend. Guys, this is Graypaw."

Graypaw gave a little wave with his paw in greeting, the others giving their various 'hello's. Luna tilted her head, and Firepaw knew her question could be either the end of a possible acquaintanceship the two could've had or the blasting off of a great friendship.

"I've heard your forest has parrots. Is that true?"

"What's a parrot?" Graypaw asked innocently, big yellow eyes blinking slowly.

Luna shook her head. "Big bird-usually colorful."

"Don't wanna run into one of those-magpies are pretty tough as it is, I couldn't imagine trying to get one of *those* down," Graypaw said with a half-smile, Luna shooting him one in return.

Friendship it is, Firepaw thought, the pain and nausea of seeing his brother torn up by some cat left behind for a second. Until it wasn't. "How's Cloverpaw?" he asked Graypaw, emerald eyes insistent.

Graypaw shrugged a shoulder, flicking an ear. "Asleep." At Princess' wide-eyed look and slight gasp, he quickly clarified: "In a good way! Literally asleep. Not dead. He's very much alive."

A weight had been lifted off of Firepaw's shoulders. *He's alive,* the thought seemed to rush into the ginger apprentice's mind, flooding into the cracks and crevices like a river seeping into the corners of a tree's roots. *StarClan, if you're out there, thank you.* He wasn't totally sold on the fact-he had to figure it out, still.

Filou shifted uncomfortably upon seeing the lingering Graypaw. "Well um," he said, bringing his light ginger tail around and onto his white paws. "Shouldn't you be going? You know... to check on him?"

Graypaw nodded quickly. "Yes! Yes. Great plan, Fidou." Filou opened his mouth to correct the gray tom but didn't get as far as a breath into a sentence. "Come on, Firepaw!" With that, the sturdy apprentice scrambled onto the fence, wobbling around to fix Firepaw with an ever-present grin.

Smudge waved his tail at him and Firepaw touched noses with each cat. "I'll be back soon," he whispered, "with Tommy."

And like that, he was going back to the forest, Graypaw joking all the way, obviously trying to get his spirits up. "Anyways, Bluestar said that apprentices usually get their warrior name six or eight moons after they start their training, so ours is coming up! Just... I don't know, *seasons* away." He frowned at his calculations, but didn't allow his tail to drag on the ground.

His friend stepped away from the entrance of the camp allowing Firepaw to go first. A little nervous but excited, he padded down the sloping catwalks of the wall, finally ending up in the clearing, and soon after the medicine den.

The dead fronds at the entrance swayed and crackled as he made his way through only to be met by the sight of a sleeping Cloverpaw. He looked considerably better; his once-messy fur was neatly groomed and the blood was, for the most part, off of his pelt. The only remnants were on the cobwebs and a few places like the crevices of his paw-pads that he would just have to get out himself. Firepaw's shoulders sank in relief.

"Oh, Firepaw," the soft voice of Spottedleaf came from the corner of the den, "I didn't see you there." She was like an angel of light, even in the dim den catching her fur on the sunlight, voice airy as ever.

"Hi." A pause for sufficient awkwardness. "Came to check on Cloverpaw," he hastily explained. The dappled she-cat nodded.

"That makes sense. Medicine cat's orders he stays here for at least a week. We'll see after that." More silence. "You may... go now."

Firepaw ducked his head to the she-cat, making his way out of the den. "Wow! That sure was a weird conversation," Graypaw said,

rejoining Firepaw, as he had been sitting at the entrance of the den. Firepaw shrugged. *She's pretty,* he heard part of his mind mewing, while at the same time, a small area yowled that he really shouldn't be hitting on the cat who could reject him and his brother at the same time, therefore killing Cloverpaw....

That night, Firepaw slept more soundly than he had intended. Cloverpaw was fine, just tired and in pain, and Firepaw had felt the need to pay respect to that. It didn't happen, and Firepaw ended up sound asleep even despite the odd howls of owls in the night.

Hi! Apologies this one was so late-I do appreciate the views, though! 400, that's a lot. Thanks y'all! For real, I am wondering if you want me to do an extra sorta chapter next week (or the week after) if we hit 500-big milestone, and it'd be fun to write something so you can get some extra background for these cats:D. ~Pringles

Chapter 10

Training with Tigerclaw was hard but rewarding. The large tabby had been right about Runningwind-he was a great hunter. But he wasn't the greatest fighter. Obviously, he wasn't bad; his former mentor, Bluestar, wouldn't have allowed him to become a warrior without being at least half-way decent.

But Tigerclaw knew moves no other cat in the clan seemed to. And, he had tasked Firepaw with practicing on... a leaf. At that moment in time, the flame-colored tom was up at who-knew-what hour, working on a move Dustpaw had dubbed the "tornado" (although StarClan knew what that was), spurred on by what had happened to Cloverpaw.

From his position a few tail-lengths away, Firepaw leapt forward, dealing a fluffy of blows. From the front of the leaf, he leapt off and away, bouncing to the side and bowling his imaginary attacker over. Even while rolling, he was clawing and scratching and dealing out a few bites. It was the main point of the "tornado". Bites. Scratches. Everything at an insanely fast speed.

Apparently, the move was used against ShadowClan. By Graypaw's calculations, they were the biggest cats in the whole forest, angry and grumpier than a badger all the time. And so, because ThunderClan and ShadowClan were apparently sworn enemies (Firepaw had learned that fact from Sandpaw), he had to learn how to defeat a ShadowClan cat. *Any* ShadowClan cat.

With each move, he pictured the cat who had attacked his brother. He wasn't one to have anger issues-that was more Dustpaw's domain-but his... friend had been right that slashing at an invisible enemy was useful to get out pent-up emotions.

Tommy hadn't been very specific about what had attacked him; all he had said was that it was a black and white tom. *That narrows it down to about half of clan cats,* Firepaw thought, swiping at the air once more.

The ginger tom had been up since midnight, unable to sleep. Sandpaw and Dustpaw had gone with Bluestar to the Moonpool, and Graypaw was passed out thanks to battle practice earlier in the day, Cloverpaw right there with him, wounds bandaged with spider webs and gross plants. Firepaw figured it was better than the sharp, thorn-like sticks his housefolk willingly allowed the cutter to claw him with every time he visited.

A cry pierced through the darkness of the clearing, making Firepaw's fur stand on end. From high up in a tree, two glowing, yellow, eyes open, wide and circular, the hoot of a howl sharp and terrifying in the near total darkness. Firepaw's muscles relaxed, but only slightly. His heart stopped pounding as quickly as it had been, but only because he knew he was too large for the owl.

Cautiously, the flame-colored warrior started off and away from the owl, making a wide half-circle to avoid the bird. As he padded through the trees and to the camp, he stopped upon hearing low voices.

What is any cat doing out this late at night? He wondered, crouching low to the ground instinctively, keeping to the shadows as best as he could. The brief memory of Tigerclaw's instructions to do so echoed in his mind. *With your pelt color, even if you weren't in the sun, you'd be a glow stick.* Firepaw had only one seen something that resembled a glowing stick, and it hadn't been very bright. It was smooth and glowing green all right, but tasted disgusting when he had bit into it very hard and had given him a stomach ache for days. There was no *way* he was biting into another one of those, *ever again.*

He crept, tail just above the fallen leaves, careful not to brush any. He felt like he was stalking prey with how careful he was being.

The whispers got louder the closer he got, even though he couldn't tell immediately who was talking. The cats were up in a tree, whispering to one another. *That's weird. Maybe a forbidden romance or something?*

He had heard Graypaw talking about them once, how they were evil, and never should happen ever because it would destroy a cat's

loyalty. Firepaw doubted, however, that they were really as evil as his dark gray friend had said.

The first cat leaned forward insistently, whispering quickly to the other one, light green eyes wide. "He's got to be stopped! Haven't you seen him? He steals from ThunderClan to give to... ShadowClan!" The word was forced, spat out even, and the shorter cat to whom he spoke sighed.

"I've seen the same things you have. We were on the same patrol, remember? Anyways, I do agree-that back-stabbing furball of a warrior's got to be stopped. Banished, killed even." Firepaw's eyes grew wide. *That means they're both from one clan... ThunderClan, by the scent of it.* Firepaw tilted his head slightly, looking up to see the she-cat who had just spoken rolling her pale yellow eyes.

The shadow-engulfed tom reeled back, nearly cracking a stick. *There's only one cat in ThunderClan whose eyes look like that!* He scrambled backwards, breath coming quickly, ears pinned to the back of his head.

His mind reeled, and he couldn't help but make a rustling in the leaves as he backed away from the potential-murderers. Both cats' ears perked up, the green-eyed one looking in his direction. Firepaw thanked StarClan when he looked back to the she-cat, whispering that it was probably just a startled owl or something.

Avoiding the trunks of trees and their sprawling roots, Firepaw raced back to the camp, wriggling under the bracken of the dirt-place wall. Sandpaw's insults had been very helpful, and her investigational remarks even more so.

Curled in his nest, he kept his eyes open for as long as he could, barely blinking, hoping to catch a look at the warriors as they came into the camp, to no avail. His mind had other plans, and he was asleep before they even reached the top of the ravine.

When he woke up the next morning to Graypaw pawing at his side, he was less than pleased. "Come on, furball!" Graypaw said, poking at him still. "We've got the dawn patrol today! Isn't that great!?"

Firepaw could only groan in response. It had been three, maybe four, hours since he had fallen asleep and he was not ready for action. He didn't even laugh at Graypaw's use of what seemed like Sandpaw's favorite insult.

Graypaw frowned, stopping from his brisk cleaning of his thick fur. "You okay? You're acting kind of funny. Do you need to see Spottedleaf?"

Firepaw shook his head finally rolling over and out of his nest, unsteadily getting to his paws. "Just tired."

His friend tilted his head in sympathy. "Wow, Runningwind must be training you *really hard,* huh?" With that, he went back to grooming his fur. *You could say that,* Firepaw thought, giving his chest fur a few licks.

Lionheart poked his maned head in. "Are you coming or not?" he asked, only a little different than his usual self, a slight, uncharacteristic glare on his face. *So he's* not *a morning person!* Firepaw mentally exclaimed, trotting out of the apprentice den for Graypaw, mood considerably lifted by the revelation.

At the entrance, Runningwind stood beside Frostfur, chatting with her about... the weather? "Anyway, I *do* think there's a high likelihood that this next storm will bring snow. It's Leafbare, after all!"

Frostfur nodded politely, mildly concerned for Runningwind's strong preference of mostly talking about nature, but letting it slide. She touched her nose to the size of Lionheart's face, eyes brightening upon seeing the two apprentices.

"Firepaw! Graypaw. Good to see you could join us."

Firepaw nodded to the she-cat, echoing Graypaw's motion before Runningwind began to-as he commonly did-bounce on his toes, impatient. "Are we going?" he asked, despite the dark circles under his eyes ready to start already. "Or are we going to let ShadowClan attack?"

Lionheart cast him a look Firepaw couldn't read but nodded. "We should go. Runningwind, what do you think of you and Firepaw to going towards the river? Frostfur, Graypaw, and I can go towards Snakerocks." Firepaw peered around the outwardly calm and collected Runningwind to catch sight of Graypaw's elated face. Firepaw stuck out his tongue in a *blegh* kind of way and Graypaw struggled to hide a cackle. Neither liked water.

Runningwind gave a calm nod. "Sure. It'll be good to go for an early morning run anyways. Good for endurance."

Graypaw cast Firepaw an apologetic look before following his golden mentor-and his mate-up the stony walls of the ThunderClan camp.

The lean Runningwind shot after them, nodding to Firepaw in a *let's go* way. Firepaw picked his way up the slope, following after the tom-it would be a tiring trip, he knew.

Once Graypaw's group was out of sight, Firepaw tried to talk to Runningwind. "Hey, Runningwind! There's something I've got to tell you!"

His mentor scoffed, rolling his eyes. "What, you're pregnant?"

Firepaw struggled to catch up with the jogging tom, still trying to get acclimated with the warrior lifestyle. He shook his head. "No, Runningwind, I-"

Runningwind gasped. "You're in love!? Is it Spottedleaf? I knew it!"

Firepaw felt a rush of warmth course through his ears. "N-no," he responded shakily, blushing a bit at the idea of the dappled calico. "I just-" he stopped talking, expecting Runningwind to interupt.

The lithe tabby warrior simply raised his brows. "Yes? Firepaw, you've really got to finish your sentences. You'll never get Sandpaw to like you if you don't."

The ginger tom's mouth dropped in shock. He *knew* about Sandpaw?

"Of course I know," Runningwind stated matter-of-factly. "You're as

obvious as a tree frog." He paused. "But continue."

A river roared by an outcrop of rocks. The tom leapt onto a large one that loomed out of the streambed, sitting down to catch his breath. Firepaw scrambled up after him, sides heaving. "Runningwind," he said once he had caught his breath, "I think some cat wants to murder you."

His mentor paused, a paw in the air to draw it over his ear. He blinked, green eyes showing a flash of confusion. *"What?"*

"I think," Firepaw began again quickly, relishing the silence, "some cat wants to kill you."

Runningwind shrugged, this time not missing a beat. "Well yeah, I have a lot of enemies-" he drew the aloft paw over his ear nonchalantly "-I'd expect I'm on a lot of cats' hit lists."

What's a hit list? Wait- never mind.

"I *mean,"* Firepaw spoke again, more insistent this time, emerald eyes trying to catch Runningwind's gaze. "I *really do think* some cat wants to *kill* you."

The tabby warrior shook his head. "Doubtful. If they did, I'd hear from Frostfur. She talks. A lot. Anyways, I've got it, thanks for your concern, though."

The tip of Firepaw's ginger tail twitched. "Runningwind! It's *Mousefur!"*

Runningwind froze, trying to gain some semblance of nonchalance back from the void of confusion. "And how did you come to that conclusion?" he finally asked, tip-toeing his way around the conversation.

"I-I've heard talk around the camp. She just, uh, is kind of mad at you." He couldn't give Tigerclaw away. He *couldn't.*

He looked skeptical, at best at this, clenching his jaw. "I appreciate your concern. But I can deal with that."

"But Runningwind-"

"No buts. Come on, let's do this border." With that, the tabby tom jumped down, leaving Firepaw and the river behind.

It was a very quiet walk back to camp. Neither talked. Finally, Runningwind sent Firepaw out on a hunting mission.

"I'm tired from training—I might be coming down with something. Why don't you and Graypaw go out and try to catch as much as you can?" The light tabbied tom had disappeared into his den, leaving his flame-colored apprentice behind.

Firepaw padded to the apprentice den, tail dragging in the dust. "Graypaw?" he called into the sheltered area, poking his head in.

The dark gray apprentice raised his head from his paws. "Huh?" he answered, gaze sleepy. "A tom's gotta get his beauty sleep."

Firepaw crawled down into the den, pulling at Graypaw's scruff. "Don't make me attack you," Graypaw mumbled. "Might just defeat you like I did the first time."

A sharp retort nearly made its way out of Firepaw's mouth but he stopped talking quickly. "I'm going hunting—bet I could catch more mice than you!"

Graypaw grunted in agreement.

Firepaw sighed. "Bet I could... catch more rabbits than you!"

"In your dreams," the apprentice mumbled, shutting his yellow eyes. "Now leave me alone-I want to dream."

Firepaw sighed. "Look, I've got a big secret to tell you. But I can't tell it in here-" he looked around suspiciously before using a phrase Filou often did "-the walls have *ears."*

Graypaw immediately sat up. "Wha-? Ears?"

The daylight apprentice gave a solemn nod of his head. "Ears. And if you want to hear this secret, you've gotta come with me."

His friend immediately jumped to his paws, shaking the scraps of moss from his pelt. "Let's GO then!"

... Which was how Firepaw found himself telling Graypaw everything. *Even* the Tigerclaw part.

"WHOA, *Tigerclaw* is training you!?" Graypaw exploded, yellow eyes huge and round like the owl's the night before.

Firepaw nodded quickly. "And I saw *Mousefur* telling some cat she was going to *kill* Runningwind! I mean, you've *seen* how he always talks about ShadowClan! It's the perfect cover-up for being on their side!"

Graypaw began to speak, but was cut off by an amused mew, sharp and slicing through the chaos of noise caused by the river. "You heard me say that, did you? What a shame."

With that, Firepaw felt a sharp blow to his head... and everything went black.

A/N: Quite the cliff hanger, eh? Anyways—just wanted to ask y'all if you would a) be interested in another story (not sure if it'd be set in the clans, it'd be mostly oc's, and in a warrior-cats-esque universe, but like I said not the clans), and b) extra chapters when we get to landmark views! For example, 500, 1K, etc. These would be chapters ranging from how exactly Tommy/Cloverpaw lost his tail, what on EARTH is going on with Tigerclaw, maybe the experience of Dustpaw and Sandpaw at the Moonstone with Bluestar... that kind of thing! So let me know if you'd be interested in those things:)). ~Pringles

Chapter 11

[image]

Firepaw's emerald eyes slitted open, and he found Mousefur pacing before him. Adjusting to the darkness, he realized he was in a cave of sorts, craggy walls stretching up, distant drips echoing through its cavernous halls as perpetual as Butters' tail flicked while lying in the sun. His nose twitched as he took a small breath, daring barely to breathe, and he caught smells of rock, dirt... and other cats. It was muddled by the cave, but they were there.

Back and forth Mousefur stepped, dark pelt bristled slightly, tail lashing in annoyance. "This is ridiculous. He was bluffing, I know it. My brother is not an *imbecile."*

A muffled *mrrow* of amusement came from some cat over to Firepaw's left, and although he yearned to try and pick out what this cat smelled like, he didn't dare—Runningwind would be proud, *if* and *only if* he made it back alive.

"Don't laugh! This is important. No, this is *ridiculous.* We should get them back to ThunderClan territory before... *he* finds out."

He? Firepaw nearly spoke aloud, but only angled his ears towards the two's conversation.

"Well, Mousefur, I'm not the one who sneaks out in the middle of the night to *speak to my brother,"* the other cat's voice was snarky, and Firepaw could scent that she was a she-cat, but before he could gain any other information, he felt a shifting pelt beside him.

Oh no, Graypaw— he had time to think before Mousefur spoke again. "At least Pearpaw has common sense. Let's not forget that you nearly let the *whole of ShadowClan know we were here."*

The whole of ShadowClan? What could this cat've done that was so bad? Graypaw groaned, and the other cat only had time to scoff, and start to remark that, "he's not even a *real* apprentice anyways,"

before Mousefur hissed.

"Graypaw! He's awake. I'd suggest you run and tell you-know-who some story about how we went hunting for a shrew—"

"Shrews? Where—?" Graypaw sleepily mewed. He twisted over, big yellow eyes opening, his familiar mouse-drenched scent (although now water and fish faintly mixing in with it) floating over to Firepaw's nose. With the motion, Firepaw thudded to the ground, breath softly shooting out of his nose with the movement.

Mousefur growled, and flicked her tail to Firepaw, nodding with her head. "Get up, Firepaw. We know you're awake."

Firepaw immediately turned to the other she-cat, who was mildly surprised, a look on her face as if she were thinking, *Oh yes, I suppose I would've noticed he was awake sooner or later.*

Her brown-and-white pelt was short, and smelled of the moors, grass and rabbit mixed in with what smelled like daisies... and was that marigold? He had no idea who she was... but she seemed like a medicine cat. Maybe.

Her fluffy tail twitched and she rolled her eyes. "Mousefur, for StarClan's sake, stop getting your whiskers in a knot. They're apprentices."

The she-cat's dark brown companion snarled and her unsheathed paws clattered against the hard stone floor with every step. *"You're* an apprentice, Mallowpaw. Come on. Think logically."

Mallowpaw rolled her eyes. "Okay, Mousefur. Let's take it back a step." The dark brown she-cat seemed to be on edge, although she seemed to slightly relax at the apprentice's words.

She padded towards Firepaw, whiskers perked, tail up, and ears swivveled forward. "Hi! I'm Mallowpaw of WindClan. Who're you?"

Graypaw lifted his shaggy head off of his paws. "I'm Graypaw. ThunderClan. This is Firepaw! He's... half-ThunderClan?"

Firepaw shook his head. Graypaw hadn't been able to *ever*

remember what a daylight warrior—*apprentice,* but just for a bit—was. "Daylight apprentice. ThunderClan during the day... kittypet by night."

The she-cat's gaze swapped from slightly interregationary to admiring in a second. "Oh. Well... congrats, I guess?"

Firepaw could only nod, head throbbing slightly in remeberance of... whatever it had been that had knocked him out. He rubbed it with his paw, hissing at the touch. "What... *who* knocked us out?"

The sides of Mallowpaw's mouth twitched into a grin and she blinked her yellow eyes. "Pearpaw! He's getting good at hunting. Well, not *cats,* but ah well. Oh—and Bear, too."

"Bear? What's a *bear?"* Graypaw mumbled, seeming to sink back into sleep.

"Big creature, big claws," a deep voice murmured from the side of the cavern almost on cue. A large, black, tom stood, peering at the two apprentices, veiled curiosity in his light brown, nearly amber eyes.

"Bear! Great to see ya. This is Firepaw and Graypaw. How's Glory doing?" Mallowpaw chirped, eyes lighting up at the thought of whoever Glory was.

The tom shook his thick pelt. "She's doing well. Kits are coming soon. Any day now." The brown-and-white she-cat beamed before gesturing with her tail to Firepaw and Graypaw.

"Come on! You're here, why not have a tour of the place?"

"What place...?" Graypaw could only mumble, barely awake. His large eyes were beginning to close and his voice was a drawl, taking on an accent Firepaw could only assume was similar to one of his parents'.

"The Tunnels, of course! Come on!" With that, she leapt forward, dabbing at Graypaw with a brown left paw.

Graypaw stumbled up from where he had been laying and almost

immediately seemed to gain energy once more. *At least I can take a back seat... and observe.*

"We're a resistance group," Mallowpaw explained as she padded through the tunnels, leading the way like she owned the place... which she probably did. "We call ourselves the Tunnelers. Right under their noses... crumbling the foundations at their core." With that, she did a spinning kick move, enthusiasm bouncing off the rocky walls of the passage like an echo.

"And you're resisting... who?" Graypaw asked, ears perked as he looked around, eyes wider than ever.

"The patriarchy!"

Silence filled the tunnel. *What's a... patriarchy?*

"Just kidding. We're resisting unjust governance among you Clans. A lot of our members are *actually* Clan cats."

"Really?" Firepaw couldn't help but ask, Graypaw still trying to figure out what kind of bird a patriarchy was.

"Yep. You know, a lot of us don't like our leaders. You ThunderClaners are pretty okay with Bluestar, but some of us... man, we've got weird representatives!"

Governance... representatives... Cloverpaw *or* Filou *should be here... not* me.

"Anyways, here's the main cavern! We do a lot of stuff here—it's basically the main clearing in a camp," Mallowpaw said, and with a grandiose swish of her brown-flecked tail revealed a looming cavern, stretching up to where Firepaw couldn't even see. Pools of watered laid at the edges of the rocky clearing, and cats roamed about. Green, luminescent, mushrooms adorned the walls, and patches of moss-like lichen peeked from the cracks and crevices, making the walls their home. A scantly-stocked fresh-kill pile sat at the center, and a few cats took what looked to be a bird from it. It was a camp.

"Who all... lives here?" Graypaw asked, looking around in awe. His

ears were pricked, as far forward as they could go, and he nearly put a paw down into a wide pool of the star-flecked water.

Mallowpaw shrugged, leaping over and around the puddles. "Anyone who wants. Mostly cats who've been exiled from their clans."

Firepaw was shaken from his thoughts and he shook his fur, which was made golden by the moon. "Exiled?"

"Oh yeah," Mallowpaw said nonchalantly, making her way to a looming cave. "ShadowClan can be tough sometimes, man."

The normally-ginger tom said nothing, but followed after her. This was all... too weird. The underside of his tail brushed into a puddle of water and he drew it back, biting back a hiss. It was too cold for this stuff.

"Ah! There she is—Dawn! How's Glory?" An actually golden she cat trotted forward, touching noses with the apprentice. She seemed to be only a few moons older than Mallowpaw, although her temparment was much calmer. Her long whiskers twitched with interest upon seeing Graypaw and Firepaw, but she made no remark about the two.

With a sweeping motion of her tail, she brought her paw down to he ground with a loud smack, before tipping her nose upward, then blinking. Mallowpaw nodded, as if the motions made any sense whatsoever.

"She's doing well. Very tired, but ready to have the kits already. Stars allow," Mallowpaw translated, looking around. "Have you seen... you-know-who?" she asked, lowering her voice. She brought her tail around to her side, moving her shoulders around in a circular motion.

Dawn gestured with her tail to an outcropping of rocks before dipping her head to the group and disappearing. Firepaw glanced over to Graypaw with a startled expression, his friend's face echoing his own.

Once Dawn was out of ear-shot, Mallowpaw spoke. "She's deaf. We're working on improvements to life for cats with deafness, though, so eventually, we'll have an army of blue-eyed, white-furred warriors. All speaking our secret language!" She seemed like she could cackle at any moment, but bit back the laugh, instantly silencing upon seeing a cat.

A black silhouette, slender and tall, stood in the moonlight, the edges of his pelt glowing by the pale rays, eyes seeming to reflect Firepaw's life back at him. He held the tom's gaze before realizing Graypaw wasn't breathing beside him. His breath had hitched in his throat, and then suddenly the shadow-cat bolted right at Graypaw. It was all he could do to keep from yowling as the shadowed warrior seemed to envelop his friend, bowling him over.

A/N: Hi hey—sorry this chapter's kind of late. Who could this shadow warrior be? Maybe a certain evil warrior in disguise? Wait and see for next week >:D. Also, let me know what the extra chapter should be on! Tigerclaw and how he knows who Firepaw could be? Tommy and his tail? Up to y'all! ~Pringles

Chapter 12

[image]

Firepaw's muscles tensed as the shadow cat bowled into Graypaw. For a moment, it was in slow motion. Graypaw's look of pure determination to beat this cat... and then the look turned into joy. The tom's yellow eyes brightened, somewhat confused, but mostly happy, and he tussled with the shadow.

"Graypaw!" the shadow-cat—who was a tom by his scent—cried, a laugh emitting from his mouth. The two rolled, play-fighting, as if they were kits.

Finally, Graypaw pushed him off, a grin on his face. "Ravenpaw! I thought you were *dead!"*

The black tom—called Ravenpaw—gave a sheepish smile. Upon closer examination, Firepaw could see that he wasn't just black; a small white dash was on his chest and his tail was tipped with a small splotch of white. His green-yellow eyes glowed with happiness, and beside him, Firepaw thought he could hear a purr coming from Mallowpaw.

"Well. It's a long story. But I'm so glad you're here—I have so much to show you, so much to tell you, so much just to... agh—" he stopped talking, taking notice of the cats who were now curiously watching. Firepaw glanced around, feeling his fur begin to prickle at the peering eyes.

"Come on. Have you guys seen the Onlooking?"

Graypaw shook his shaggy head, a smile still plastered on his face. Firepaw echoed the motion, disbelief flooding his thoughts. *How is Ravenpaw not dead? Surely Tigerclaw couldn't be so mistaken as to think he was really died.*

A grunt came from Mousefur, who was suddenly behind Firepaw. *Spots and stripes, she's a ghost,* Firepaw managed to think, jumping

away from her slightly. "We shouldn't be showing them the tunnels this early. We don't even know if they're not spies." She cast a suspicious look to Firepaw, who felt his face warm and his ears flit back a bit. *I'm not evil.*

Ravenpaw's excitement dimmed slightly. Mallowpaw spoke in his favor. "It's just the Onlooking—not as if we're giving away top-secret information. Come on—it'll be fine!"

With that, the brown-and-white patched she-cat hared off, striped tail flung out behind her as she ran. Graypaw glanced to Ravenpaw and shrugged, following the other apprentice's lead as he dashed off after Mallowpaw.

Mousefur heaved a huge sigh, light yellow eyes slitted. She glanced to Firepaw, flicked her tail, and jogged off after the three, leaving the flame-colored apprentice to follow.

With a burst of speed, Firepaw ran past the she-cat—he *was* trained by Runningwind, after all—and up beside Graypaw.

"So," he managed quietly between lungfuls of air, "who exactly is Ravenpaw?"

Graypaw raised his brows and cast him an incredulous look. "You don't know who Ravenpaw is?"

The fiery apprentice could only shake his head as he ran. Graypaw sighed before explaining. "Ravenpaw's an apprentice of ThunderClan—at least, he *was.* I'm not sure how death-slash-exile works with clans and stuff. He's Tigerclaw's apprentice."

Firepaw felt a shiver ripple his pelt, although he tried to stifle it. "So Ravenpaw's the apprentice who Tigerclaw said he'd seen die?"

"Yup. Looks like he's lying, though," Graypaw replied, stating the obvious. Firepaw could only nod—*but what's his reasoning behind lying about it? Why didn't he like Ravenpaw?*

Nearly running into Mallowpaw, he skidded to a stop, relieved to find the she-cat wasn't at all worried about the near-collision. He glanced around and felt his stomach drop at the sheer enormity of

the scenery before him and the mysticism of it.

"This is the Onlooking," Mallowpaw announced cheerily, back in tour guide mode.

Firepaw took in a shallow breath, lungs having recovered from the sprint. "Whoa," he breathed. Before the group, a large stone rose. It glowed, like a star, reaching up into the cavern as if ready to touch the sky itself. Pale and ancient, it was surely special.

"This is the Moonstone," Ravenpaw said in a quiet, hallowed, voice. "It's where the medicine cats speak to StarClan, and the clan leaders, too."

"Great StarClan," whispered Graypaw, for once silenced. As Mallowpaw at the side, her tail flicked back and forth, an uncomfortable expression on the tabby she-cat's face.

"I mean," she began, careful with how she placed her words, "it's not the *coolest* place ever. Sure cats talk to StarClan... but it's not like all cats can."

A hiss came from Mousefur. "Watch how you speak. StarClan are our ancestors; don't disrespect them." Mallowpaw cast her a skeptical look but hushed, and Firepaw was keenly aware of her quiet fidgeting.

Ravenpaw finally spoke, raking his yellow-green eyes away from the stone. "Anyways," he said, making brief eye-contact with both Graypaw and Firepaw, "we should get to my den—we've got a lot to talk about."

Leading the way, the nearly all-black tom trotted off, waving his tail for the others to follow him. Mousefur once more took up the rear of the patrol, having materialized as quickly as she had disappeared when Firepaw left her to follow the group the first time.

Ravenpaw's den wasn't large; near the back, in a small hollow, was a nest, with a couple of feathers and lots of moss, in front of which the tom sat, ready to tell his story finally.

Graypaw sat down a tail-length away, yellow eyes intently watching

the tom, and Firepaw sat next to him. Mousefur waited outside of the den, although Firepaw could tell that she wasn't a fan of the situation by her constantly twitching tail, and Mallowpaw sat a little off from the ThunderClan apprentices, perhaps a little awkward.

The lost apprentice was the one to open the conversation. "So... what exactly did Tigerclaw tell you?" he asked finally, looking from Firepaw to Graypaw to Firepaw again.

Graypaw glared, tail whisking across the floor of the den. "He said you were killed in an accident! A hunting accident." A growl rose in his throat. "Said you jumped into a river."

Ravenpaw's eyes widened and he drew back. "He... he did?"

"No—that's not exactly right," Firepaw said, shaking his head, brows furrowing as he tried to remember the great tabby's words. All eyes were on him, and he straightened up a bit, thinking hard.

"Tigerclaw said that you wanted to show him a new skill. He said you tried to jump over to the RiverClan border, but then a cat jumped out of the weeds at you and you both drowned because you went off the waterfall."

Ravenpaw swallowed. "That's... not true," he hoarsely whispered, eyes big, suddenly looking very thin, from his large ears to his skinny frame.

"We know," Mallowpaw said dryly, despite the compassion in her gaze for the other apprentice.

"What *really* happened, Ravenpaw?"

The black tom sank down to his forepaws, and slowly began to tell the story. His voice shook with the words, but the story was firm, and as far as Firepaw could tell he wasn't lying, and the story held water.

"We were... on a border patrol."

Firepaw nodded. That much lined up with Tigerclaw.

"And... and Tigerclaw said we were going to the RiverClan border."

That would make sense.

"So we went... and there was a warrior there. Leopardfur. She asked him what we were doing there, so close, and then he told me to... to attack her."

The tom closed his eyes, and Firepaw's own widened. Graypaw reeled back in shock, horror lacing his features.

"WHAT."

Ravenpaw barely acknowledged him. "He threatened to claw me if I didn't. So... I did. But—I didn't have a choice—I-I wouldn't have if I... if I had a choice. But he wasn't lying, Graypaw, he said he would do it, he's done it before, Firepaw, you guys have to believe me."

Mallowpaw scooted closer to the tom, their pelts almost brushing. Ravenpaw leaned into her, and her eyes brightened a little in surprise. "No—it wasn't your fault, Ravenpaw," Graypaw mewed, glaring at the wall.

"What happened next?" Mallowpaw pressed, turning to look at him and nearly smacking him.

"I... I leapt at her... and she just stood there. She fought back and—and—we rolled into the water. And then I was... falling... and when I came back up... she was gone."

The tom's voice had become thick, and his words seemed to get stickier and stickier, as if he was having trouble forcing them out of his mouth.

Graypaw padded forward, butting his head against Ravenpaw's side. "It's not your fault."

"No! I mean, yes! It is my fault. I shouldn't have listened to him. Graypaw, I thought I was better than this..." he trailed off.

The dark gray tom beside him shook his head vehemently. "No. No. It's not your fault. Tigerclaw is... Tigerclaw is a fox-hearted mange-

fur of a warrior. He forced you into this." He looked pleadingly to Firepaw, begging for help.

"We can fix this when we go home, Ravenpaw! We can tell Bluestar. She'll believe us. It'll be okay."

Ravenpaw's eyes became larger. "You can't tell Bluestar—you can't tell Tigerclaw—you can't tell *anyone,"* he whispered, shrinking back.

Mallowpaw leaned against him comfortingly. "It'll be okay. It'll be okay, Ravenpaw." She looked over to Firepaw, yellow-amber gaze unreadable.

Graypaw quickly changed the subject. "What happened next?"

"Next... I found myself on the moor. I didn't know how I got there. But there was this... cat. She was standing over me, and she said, 'Great StarClan, *how* did you manage to *survive* that!?" Mallowpaw mouthed along with the words, and Firepaw had a suspicion that she was that cat. "... So I've been living out here by myself since then. Mallowpaw—she was the cat who found me—kept bringing cats to me, and soon enough we made up a resistance. A rebel group, if you will."

"What are you fighting for? Or—against?" Firepaw asked gently, hoping he didn't trigger a mental breakdown.

"We're fighting against the evil in the clans," Ravenpaw said, standing up, straightening, a new, determined gleam in his eyes. "We have to stop cats like Tigerclaw, cats who hurt those who are weak. We've got to bring justice to the clans." He stood heroically, tail unmoving, muzzle pointed up slightly, before he brought his gaze back to Firepaw.

"Will you help?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Graypaw. He rose, looking to Firepaw. "What do you say, Firepaw? Want to fight for what's right?"

Words raced across the flame-colored tom's mind, in fragments, and barely understandable. *Justice. Battles. Waterfalls. Tigerclaw.* The last word came slowly, as if his brain couldn't register it.

Graypaw waited impatiently. "Well?"

He shifted. Finally, he gave an answer. "I will." It was a vow, he knew.

He was going to take back the night. Fight for what was right. Bring back justice. Defend the Clans. *Avenge Tommy.*

But, a small thought nagged at the corners of his mind, and finally he allowed it to make itself fully known. *But how?*

Chapter 13

[image]

Firepaw's heart pounded in his chest as he padded beside Runningwind towards the ShadowClan border. Orange flooded into purple as the sun slowly rose, and he could practically feel the frost of the quickly-coming leafbare settling on his pelt.

The Tunnlers had been friendly enough, and most were perfectly happy to talk and share tongues with cats from other clans... but when decisions had to be made, they got down to business almost immediately, without any small talk.

Two days after Graypaw and Firepaw had arrived—*A better word,* Firepaw mused, *would've been cat-burglared*—Mallowpaw had called a meeting of all the cats. She seemed to be a deputy of sorts, under Ravenpaw's hesitant lead, Mousefur there as a mentor.

She had smacked her paw down in a reddish dust that covered a bit of the cave floor, a plume of rust-colored dust rising like smoke, meeting every cat's gaze before finally speaking. "We attack here," she mewed, ear twitching as she observed the finality of the statement. She had drawn out a diagram, and in the process, had gotten her paws orange, but didn't seem to mind.

"If ShadowClan is really up to something like you say," she inclined her head to a couple of ShadowClan cats who sat, sharing tongues across from her.

A prolonged groan came from near Firepaw, and he edged forward to see who had spoken.

Upon seeing the raggedy gray she-cat sat, back permanently hunched, dandelion-colored eyes rolling. "I just *told* you ShadowClan is planning something—it's written all over that mange-fur Brokenstar's face!" she exploded, near-shredded ear flicking as she spoke. She glared around the ring of cats, eyes catching on Firepaw's for a moment. *Too long, as far as I'm*

concerned, the flame-colored apprentice found himself thinking.

"Yellowfang, we know you were a medicine cat, but somebody has to make sure he's not folloing you all," Mousefur evenly said, rolling her own ice-lit yellow eyes.

Yellowfang hissed, indignance at her authority being questioned obvious. Her eyes narrowed as she stared the ThunderClan mentor down, but Mousefur held her ground. Neither said anything.

"... Right. ANYWAY," Mallowpaw continued, marking out another area. "we need spies. Thankfully, we've got you and Ash-heart." She gave a swift nod to a tortoiseshell called Fernshade, who Firepaw had worked with the day before to make nests for possible guests of the Tunnelers. The yellow-eyed she-cat made no move except to twitch her gray-and-brown striped tail in acknowledgment.

"We also need a patrol to see what ShadowClan says to outsiders. Anyone up for that?"

All eyes instantly went to the ThunderClan cats of the group. Mousefur narrowed her eyes, looking over from the white-patched tom beside her. "What? No. We barely have warriors as it is."

A grumble came from a RiverClan cat, who stood to the side, thin tail curled over his paws. Beside him, a she-cat looked to be trying not to laugh, tabby shoulders shaking despite how hard she tried.

"You never volunteer, Reedtail. And you too, Sedgecreek—you're laughing like a couple of apprentices."

Indignant now the brown tabby drew back a paw. "Hey now, that's just unfair! It's not as if *RiverClan* has a surplus of cats ready to betray Crookedstar at any minute."

Her statement hung in the air, the same way mice don't. A sheet of silence had descended on the cats, and no cat talked for a few moments.

Finally, Mallowpaw cleared her throat. "Could we do it? Any WindClan takers? Sorrelshine *never* lets me out of camp, so I'm out of the equation."

A large, brown-coated warrior shook his shaggy head, awkwardly fidgeting with a small rock near his paws. "I'll talk to your mentor, but Tallstar is suspicious enough of us. I don't think it's a good plan for WindClan to go."

The brown-and-white apprentice cast a resigned look to the tom, finally nodding. "That's reasonable." Her gaze flitted over to the ThunderClan cats once more. "So... looks like you guys are our last option."

Mousefur huffed, a frown on her face. "Fine," she finally said. Mallowpaw's eyes brightened.

"Great! You can go out on a patrol and—"

"Nope."

Her gaze faltered, a new confusion emerging. "What? I thought you just said you would go...?"

"I said *ThunderClan* would go. Not me. Besides, I have an apprentice."

Yellowfang growled. "I have an apprentice, too, but *look where we are now."*

A hiss came from the brown warrior, and her claws slowly slid out. *"Had,"* she corrected, eyes glinting in the moonlight. "And my apprentice is, as of late, clueless."

Firepaw's ears flattened and he found himself defensive on Cloverpaw's behalf. "Hey! Don't talk about him like that, he just got attacked!"

Mousefur swung her head over to Firepaw and hissed. "I didn't ask for your opinion, *Firepaw*." She turned her gaze back towards Yellowfang, whose long fur was beginning to stand on end, and she raised her voice even louder. "And besides, we have just *plenty* of warriors and revolutionaries in our clan that would love to help."

"Great, I'm sure you could spare one," Yellowfang hissed, biting sarcasm thick in her voice.

"No, we just—" Mousefur thundered, but was cut off by a yowl.

"GUYSCANWEJUSTGETALONG," the black tom cried into the night, immediately crouching down and pulling his paws over his head as if he was afraid some cat would box his ears.

A deafening silence fell over the cats, stronger than the first time. Everyone looked to Ravenpaw in surprise until finally his green eyes opened and he straightened up, carefully speaking.

"It seems like," he began, giving a nod to both Yellowfang and Mousefur, "ThunderClan is short-staffed."

"You're telling *me,"* Mousefur spat, eyes locked with the ShadowClan ex-medicine cat.

Ravenpaw continued after a short pause, "However, I do think that ThunderClan is the most strategic clan for this. Mousefur, exactly how many cats do we have from ThunderClan?"

The crouching brown she-cat gave a thoughtful expression, counting up the members. "Six."

"Lovely. That's counting Firepaw and Graypaw, right?"

Mousefur nodded.

"Great. So that's you, Runningwind, Firepaw, Graypaw, Rosetail, and Robinwing."

Another nod. Beside Firepaw, Graypaw's jaw dropped.

"Runningwind is training Firepaw, right?"

A tail flick.

"So could Firepaw and Runningwind go on a patrol to ask?"

All eyes went to Firepaw, who glanced about, meeting as many as possible. "It's their decision," Mousefur finally said, straightening up and looking to the flame-colored apprentice. Ravenpaw's inquiring gaze bore into him as well now.

"I mean... it's really up to him..." Firepaw trailed off.

"He'll totally be up for it," Mousefur flatly stated, rolling her eyes. "The question is, are *you."*

... Which was how Firepaw ended up on the patrol. His mentor had insisted it be early—earlier than usual, even, and had gone so far as to ask Redtail the night before.

The tortoiseshell tom had been surprised, but nodded, assigning Willowpelt and Frostfur—who hadn't been out of camp in moons—to go with them, for extra safety, murmuring something about ShadowClan being shadier than normal.

As the mentor and apprentice approached the border, Runningwind quizzed him on random things, ranging from how tall a badger is exactly to whether pinecones open up when it's damp or dry.

With promptness, Firepaw answered, but his mind was on other things. Specifically, who attacked Cloverpaw.

His brother was up and hobbling around the camp, doing various tasks. Dappletail wouldn't let him be on tick duty—she said the mouse bile that was used might get in his battle wounds—and insisted he watch the kits instead.

Cloverpaw seemed happy to oblige. From sitting at a distance to watch Tigerclaw and Goldenflower's kits, Bramblekit and Tawnykit, squirm over one another as their mother watched like a hawk, to giving Frostfur's oldest kits, Brackenkit and Cinderkit badger rides, he seemed alright. When he wasn't spending time with the clan's youngest members, he was helping Spottedleaf do various herb-ey things—Firepaw didn't know *what*—and seemed to be enjoying that, too. He was, apparently, a tom of multiple talents.

Runningwind flicked his tail, grazing Firepaw's right ear, snapping him out of his thoughts, as effective as a dunk in cold water. Coming back into reality, Firepaw blinked his emerald eyes, finding himself face-to-face with a few ShadowClan warriors.

The largest, a battle-scarred tom, snarled upon seeing the

ThunderClan patrol. "What're you doing on ShadowClan territory?" he growled, face contorting into that of a nightmare. Firepaw fought the itching sensation beneath his pelt, steeling himself against the psychological torture of even being in the *general vicinity* of the tom.

Runningwind gave the slightest, most-curt nod, to the tom. "Clawface. How is ShadowClan faring?" he asked, bypassing the question.

Clawface hissed, but the tom next to him—a thin, black-pelted one, with piercing green eyes—holds up his tail. "ShadowClan is well. Perhaps, in the future, it would be best to ask that question at a Gathering." On Clawface's other side, a tom around Firepaw's size nodded quickly, glancing from Firepaw to his mentor's faces.

The light brown tabby tom beside Firepaw lifted a shoulder, outwardly unbothered. "ThunderClan also is doing well—thanks for asking." Firepaw nearly expected him to ask if they had any plans of an invasion of ThunderClan, and was nicely surprised when he didn't. By the black tom's amused whisker twitch, he assumed Runningwind knew him, and the good-natured eye-roll confirmed it. "We were wondering, specifically, how Dawncloud was doing?" Firepaw was pretty sure he picked that name our of nowhere.

Still, the tom bristled. "Why?" he demanded, green eyes narrowing. Runningwind frowned a bit.

"Why not?"

Giving something that was between a groan and a growl, the sleek tom straightened, giving the two a dignified look. "She's fine. I guess. It's been a few moons since I spoke with her."

A moon since you spoke to your clanmate? You're not even a daylight warrior! Firepaw mentally scoffed, noting the unsure flicking of Runningwind's tail-tip.

The tom rolled his shoulders and gave a final nod. "Well. Good to hear you're all alive and well." With that, he retreated into the bushes, out of sight of the ShadowClan patrol.

Firepaw leapt on after him into the woods, noting the confused shadowy warriors behind him. *Well that was weird, I*—he only got so far before Runningwind nipped his tail, gesturing to *jump into this bush already.*

Doing so, he spies the ShadowClan cats turning from the border and padding back to their own clan. When they were for sure out of earshot, Runningwind gingerly stepped out of the bush, plucking a few dried up berries from his pelt. "Well *they* were weird."

Emerging from the trees, Frostfur raised her brows. "ShadowClan's *always* weird."

"You'll have to be more specific," Willowpelt informed Runningwind, trotting back to camp, inclining her head to Frostfur, beckoning her to follow.

Runningwind lowered his voice, looking to his apprentice. "Weirder than usual. Dawncloud used to have kits. Not that you would know, but... nobody's sure what happened to them. Or *her.* We haven't seen her at Gatherings in moons."

"Maybe she just doesn't get out often?" Firepaw suggested, tilting his head up at the barren tree branches high above them. Beside him, Runningwind shook his head.

"No, no—ShadowClan's got an actual rotation. Something else is going on." He left it at that for a moment before speaking once more. "On the other paw, good news, you're coming to the Gathering tonight."

With that, he bounded off, tail held high as he ducked into camp, leaving an emotionally-mixed Firepaw behind.

Chapter 14

[image]

Firepaw leapt out of the way of the hissing snake. Its arrow-shaped head swung at him, jaw open, fangs on display, as it bolted forward. Its form was thin and whip-like, and he didn't want to be anywhere *near* its tail end, either.

Clawing his way up onto a bough of an ash tree, he couldn't help but notice its diamond-patterned back, and he *really* couldn't help but notice the hole it'd come from. *Imagine what* Tigerclaw *will say when he sees this adder!* the apprentice couldn't help but think, and as he tore down from the tree, sinking his own fangs into the snake's... neck? upper back? a warm feeling flooding through him.

"HEY PFIREFAWL," a voice hollered from the trees, and the flame-colored tom turned to catch sight of Graypaw, a starling in his jaws. "Sheck out fwhat I ghaught!" A smile came onto Firepaw's face at the sight of the bird, and he held up his own catch.

"WHOA AN ADDER," Graypaw said remarkably clearly, yellow eyes lighting up with excitement and a bit of envy. "Wish I could catch one of those," he said, dropping the bird at his paws.

The smile spread into a grin and quickly leapt to Graypaw's face, too. "Well, you *could've,"* Firepaw mewed, biting back his own laughter, "if you weren't so *loud."*

Graypaw snorted, bumping Firepaw with his side. "You've been hanging out with Sandpaw too much."

"Have not."

"Have too."

"Dude, she hates my guts."

"Well spotted," a voice cut through the air, causing Firepaw and

Graypaw's heads both to swivvel back to find a sandy she-cat standing on top of one of the larger rocks of Snakerocks. Her light green eyes were somehow icy yet warm, and Firepaw couldn't help but roll his own at her.

"Kind of you to make an entrance just *now,"* he mewed, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Yes, well," Sandpaw said, a wisp of a smile on her muzzle, "I figured you wouldn't die."

Thank you for that, Firepaw thought to himself, saying nothing. A silence hung in the air, and Sandpaw apparently felt the need to fill it. "And even if you had, Spottedleaf's just a hop-skip-and-a-bound away. It wouldn't have been *too* hard for her to fix you up."

"Sandpaw, he would've been *dead,"* Graypaw deadpanned, starting off to camp.

Sandpaw gave a *harrumph,* leaping down from the boulder and walking up to the two. "Not if Spottedleaf worked her magic."

"Yeah, okay," was all Graypaw said, casting Firepaw a look and rolling his eyes at the flame-colored tom. "C'mon, Firepaw."

Giving a glance back at the pretty... sarcastic (*Yes, pretty sarcastic is a good term,* Firepaw found himself thinking) she-cat, he blinked. "You coming? If we get back sooner rather than later, we'll probably have a better chance at going to the Gathering."

The sandy she-cat cast Firepaw a startled glance, as she'd been staring off into space. "Uh. Yeah, that's true," she mewed finally, nodding. "Probably, that is."

Shaking himself out, Graypaw rolled his eyes once more. "Let's *go,* already. If you're *right* Firepaw, we'll be *late* as it is." This snapped both cats out of their unbroken eye-contact trance.

"Right!"

"Yes."

"Most definitely."

"Indubidably."

With that, Sandpaw bounded forward, smacking Firepaw with her tail as she went. Much more gently than normally, though, which was odd. *It seems like the perfect time for a thwack.*

Graypaw only shrugged when he mentioned it, though. "Girls are weird." It seemed to be his catchphrase.

Firepaw shrugged back, padding after his friend and into the chilly forest. Runningwind had been remarking for days how it most definitely would snow soon, and Firepaw was ready for it. Even though his kit fur hadn't totally given way for his adult coat... he was ready to finally see some snow. It was about time. It was nearing the middle of leaf-bare and he was *cold.* He at least wanted to be cold in style. Or something.

Trotting into ThunderClan camp with the adder hanging in his jaws felt *good.* He was a force to be reckoned with. Spitting the vile creature out onto the fresh-kill pile felt maybe even better than it felt to have caught it at all; the thing tasted like roadkill.

From the entrance of the nursery, a startled gasp came from a queen—Goldenflower. She had somehow managed to get away from her squealing kits, whose names were Bramblekit and Tawnykit, and was sunning herself, becoming a sort of golden halo in the pale leaf-bare sunlight. "Firepaw, who *caught* that?" she mewed, pulling herself up to her full and fluffy height.

Firepaw gave a little purr, smile returning to his face. "I did." The she-cat blinked. He felt the need to reiterate his claim. "Me. I caught the adder."

She gave a nod of recognition, slinking forward carefully and sniffing the snake before drawing back with a little snarl. Her yellow eyes narrowed as she surveyed the body of the adder on the fresh-kill pile. "It's poisonous, Firepaw."

He nodded. "I know."

"Why is it on the fresh-kill pile, then?" she asked, not an ounce of scorn in the golden queen's gaze. Firepaw shifted a bit, shrugging. He opened his mouth to speak, but—

"I mean, it shouldn't hurt a cat, right? If it's only got its poison thingies in its mouth, we just have to avoid its head." The brown-and-white tabby who'd spoken tilted his head, a half-smile gracing his cobweb-padded face.

"Cloverpaw!" Firepaw had to resist the urge to smash into his brother, who, although his half-tail looked fine... the rest of him didn't. His brother's face glowed.

"I'm doing better, thanks for asking," he finally purred as the flame-colored apprentice just stood watching him, mouth partially agape. "How are you?"

"Great. Just—awesome."

Graypaw gave a laugh from the side, where he was (unsuccessfully) flirting with Spottedleaf. "Ha! *Purr*-fect."

Firepaw barely heard him and was busy looking over Cloverpaw's injuries, particularly his face. A long scratch, still unhealed fully, ran down the side of it, and a few clumps of fur had obviously been pulled from his coat. He could only shiver at imagining how much that had hurt.

Cloverpaw scoffed at the gesture, ear flicking. "Come on, I'm fine. How are the sibs?"

The sibs. Firepaw blinked. Cloverpaw rolled his eyes, a smile creeping onto his face. "You know. Filou. Luna. *Princess?"*

Smacked out of his thoughts by the mention—by name—of his siblings, he straightened up, nodding quickly. "Right! Right. Very good. Yes. Very good."

"Runningwind's not happy you missed a couple days of training," the brown tabby tom remarked nonchalantly, looking over the fresh-kill pile in search of something to eat.

"Well—it's just a couple days." Firepaw felt stiff. Runningwind was *mad?* Mad at *what?* Not killing Mousefur?

Cloverpaw shrugged. "Well, still—" he was cut off by the powerful yowl of Bluestar as she leapt up onto the Highrock, icy blue eyes taking in the clearing.

Turning away from the fresh-kill pile, Cloverpaw padded over to where Spottedleaf sat at the entrance of the medicine den, probably to get more salve for his wounds. Firepaw looked up at the blue-gray she-cat who stood atop the rock, staring at the clan beneath her. "Tonight is the Gathering," she announced. Most cats knew that. "I'll be taking a large patrol—ShadowClan has been lurking at the edges of ThunderClan territory recently, they should know how powerful we are." Of course. Only made sense. "I'll be taking Redtail, Spottedleaf, Tigerclaw, Lionheart, Dustpaw, Firepaw, Halftail, Patchpelt, and Sandpaw. That is all. We leave soon."

With that, she leapt down from the Highrock. Graypaw sidled over to Firepaw, a slightly saddened look on his face. "Too bad I can't come—you'll have to fill me in!" he chirped, demeanor changing immediately, grinning at the idea of being filled in.

Firepaw was always amazed at his friend's moodswings, and this time was no different. "Sure thing. Hey, Dustpaw!" he called over to the muddy brown tom, who looked over and blinked before slowly walking towards the two. "Want to walk with me?"

Dustpaw shrugged. "I'm walking with Sandpaw," he mewed, having softened to Firepaw in the last few moons of being with ThunderClan. He paused, watching Firepaw wilt a bit. "But I'll introduce you to some cats."

The tom rocked back on his heels, ignoring Firepaw's excited look at the offer. His gaze went past the fiery tom, to the fresh-kill pile, where the adder rested on top. His gaze lingered on the snake, before he mumbled something about how "he caught one too", and was jolted out of his thoughts.

The baritone voice of Whitestorm shook both Dustpaw and Firepaw from their observations—Dustpaw of the fresh-kill pile and Firepaw

of the other apprentice. "Let's go!"

Yes, Firepaw thought, *let's.*

Chapter 15

[image]

The moon was high and bright, and Firepaw's pelt was fluffed out as much as it would go. Despite the cool light from the luminous sphere, it looked as if it could snow in the near future, and a slight breeze amused itself as it whisked through the trees, watching the cats within the forest shiver at each new wind. The trees themselves were dark and empty, their boughs barren from the cold, and all creatures with any bit of logic were alseep in their dens, carefully burrowed away from the cold.

The patrol of ThunderClan cats traversed through the cool forest, making their way to Fourtrees. The large oaks had been there since the very beginning, and, although Firepaw had heard that they were only saplings when the clans had first arrived—whenever *that* was—he shivered at the thought of something so old.

He looks around at the patrol. Sandpaw and Dustpaw are going back and forth, arguing about who-knew-what, a few tail-lengths away. Lionheart, Redtail, and Bluestar walked up front, discussing, perhaps, the politics of the clans, and exactly what ThunderClan's relationship was to be to ShadowClan in the future. Patchpelt and Halftail were near the back, reminiscing about the olden days, Tigerclaw was avoiding everyone altogether, and Spottedleaf was—

"Hi, Firepaw! Chilly out tonight, isn't it?" the young medicine cat piped, fur fluffed out as well, face glowing despite the cold darkness of the forest. Firepaw was a little surprised she was even talking to him—he was sure she was *nice,* but she was a medicine cat, and as far as he knew, they didn't mesh with normal cats much.

"Yeah," the flame-colored tom agreed, frantically looking everywhere and struggling not to give into her amber gaze. The dappled she-cat ignored his frantastical glancing, continuing on with the conversation as if everything was no big deal and everything was smooth and fine and everybody was okay, and nobody was trying not to meet anybody else's gaze.

"My friend, Mousefur—you know Mousefur, right? Wait, of course you do, she's the mentor of Cloverpaw—said Runningwind was predicting snow, and I didn't believe it a few days ago, but it looks pret-ty likely now. What do you think?" He finally turned to look to Spottedleaf, wishing he hadn't, as he was absorbed into her gaze. He didn't even have time to notice his own thought of *apparently medicine cats* do *have friends.*

Her amber eyes were bright and cheerful, and although as the seconds of silence ticked by, her gaze turned into slightly questioning, he couldn't help but notice the way her eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled, and he noticed just how different the patches of brown were around her eyes. One was a sort of cinnamon color, and the other was what could only be explained as a lovely, earthen, muddy sort of color.

"Firepaw?" He was broken out of his thoughts, and he shook his head quickly, focusing on any cat other than Spottedleaf. *Willowpelt. Mousefur. Bluestar. Sandpaw???*

"Hm?" he finally managed, forcing an image of Sandpaw's lightly tabbied pelt into his mind.

Spottedleaf chuckled. "I was *asking* about what you thought of the weather."

Firepaw finally was able to answer. "I mean, Runningwind is usually pretty accurate, so..." he trailed off. Spottedleaf nodded agreeing with him. *Well, at least she agrees,* he thought to himself before she spoke once more.

"That's true. You know, Runningwind and Mousefur were born in a litter just a little while after me and Redtail and Willowpelt—"

"Wait. You guys are *siblings!?"* They looked nothing alike. Well, okay, if Firepaw puzzled *really hard,* maybe he could make out *some* similarities, but... how even were they related?? They looked *nothing* alike.

"Yep! Redtail's oldest, of course, and Willowpelt's youngest, but we're littermates. Anyways, when we became apprentices, they only

just became one moon old or so, so we really didn't interact *all* that much, but oh my word, you should've *seen* the trouble they got in that one time he gave Tigerclaw a sap-stuffed mouse."

"A... what?" Firepaw could barely register it. Runningwind had stuffed a mouse with *sap?* And had given it to *Tigerclaw?*

"Yeah, a sap-stuffed mouse. Tigerclaw's *still* sore about it. Anyways, it was a whole murder-mystery type thing and it took forever to figure out who did it, until Redtail—he wasn't deputy then—had the bright idea to challenge Runningwind to a race. The only reason Redtail *won* that race, by the way, is probably because Runningwind *ran into a literal tree,* and when Bluestar—Blue*fur* at the time—came over to make sure he wasn't going to die, she noticed the sap scent on his pelt was the same as the mouse-sap-scent... and then he was on apprentice duty for a moon." She burst out laughing, and Firepaw found himself relaxing, laughing as well. He glanced up to his mentor—who Bluestar had *accidentally* forgotten to mention in her calling out of who would go to the Gathering. The pale tabby was in a conversation with Whitestorm about something or other, making wild gestures with his tail. Looking back to Spottedleaf, he caught a quizzical expression on her face as she stared at him, head tilted a few degrees to the left.

Firepaw raised his brows at her. "What?" he asked. Spottedleaf shook her head, giving a shrug.

"Nothing, nothing. I'm just... theorizing."

"Theorizing about *what?"* Firepaw asked, brows crinkling in confusion—and concern.

"Oh... just... future events," Spottedleaf gave a sheepish smile, then her face brightened. "There's Barkface! I've *got* to tell him about my first use of horsetail for stopping bleeding!" With that, she bounded off, taking only a few steps before turning around to Firepaw. "I'll ask Sandpaw to introduce you to some cats," she mewed, flicking her tail in goodbye before dashing off again, stopping quickly to talk to Sandpaw, and then racing off before the apprentice could answer, catching up to a shaggy color-pointed tom.

Firepaw padded up to Sandpaw and Dustpaw, marveling at the looming oaks, then looking to Sandpaw. "Dustpaw, did you say you could introduce me to some cats..?" he asked, eyes flitting to the tom's orange eyes.

Dustpaw half-shrugged, giving a nod. "Sure, I—"

Sandpaw cut him off. "I've got it," she gruffly announced, side-eyeing Firepaw. "Spottedleaf made me," she muttered, ears flitting back.

Firepaw raised his brows, Dustpaw copying the movement. "How'd she get you to agree to that—" the mud-colored tom began, before catching a scathing look from the sandy she-cat.

"Don't. Ask. Come on, bees-for-brains," she growled, stalking after the majority of the ThunderClan patrol and into the clearing.

The grass was dead and stiff, not unlike the grass in other parts of the territory, and leaves littered the ground, but it was wonderful. The oaks stretched up to the sky, so old that their branches reached out and touched each other, allowing only dapples of the moonlight into the clearing. Filtering in, the light reached the many coats of cats, all from different clans, causing them to take on a silvery sort of glow.

Firepaw's emerald eyes grew larger as he tried to estimate just how many were there, and then even larger as he realized all four clans were there.

Most cats sat in the open, chatting and laughing with each other, and, while there were a few cats that seemed to keep to themselves —Firepaw noticed a few eyes in the bushes—he figured it was nothing, only happy clan rivalries.

Sandpaw flicked her tail at him, beckoning him after her, ready to finally introduce him to some other clans. Dustpaw padded a few pawsteps after her, Firepaw at his side. They weren't as close as Firepaw and Graypaw... but at least Dustpaw didn't hate his guts anymore.

Padding up to a group of apprentices, Sandpaw sat down, listening for just a moment, ears angled towards a debate between what looked to be a WindClan apprentice and a RiverClan one.

"Obviously, if the ravine didn't separate our two territories, we'd have more land. I mean, on one edge of our territory, there's a literal twoleg camp. Not great for hunting."

The WindClan apprentice scoffed, rolling his eyes. "RiverClan doesn't *hunt,* you *fish.* Not sure you could catch a mouse anyways..." he trailed off, eliciting a quiet growl from the she-cat who'd just spoken.

"Ridgepaw, what do you think we do when the river freezes over?" the RiverClan apprentice asked, rolling her amber eyes. "Besides, how would you know? You're WindClan."

A familiar voice cut through the air. "She has a point, Ridgepaw." Looking over, Firepaw locked eyes with Mallowpaw. The she-cat blinked in surprise, recovering herself quickly nonetheless.

Ridgepaw—a brown tom with classic tabby markings—scoffed. "Fine. Still, where would RiverClan even expand?"

"They'd probably go towards ThunderClan territory," a tom, who was lying on the ground, mewed, drawing a paw over his ear.

Ridgepaw groaned. "Wetpaw, *how?"* he asked, fixing the splotched tabby with his piercing blue gaze.

The tom shrugged. "I mean, if the ravine doesn't exist, then the river probably doesn't, either."

"But then we wouldn't be RiverClan," a silver-and-black she-cat remarked, tilting her head. "And besides, this is a pointless debate. We all know WindClan is just enough to give to those who need it —" she diplomatically nodded to Mallowpaw and Ridgepaw, the latter of the two who puffed out his chest "—and we wouldn't invade ThunderClan anyways." She wrinkled her nose. "Too dense for my liking."

"The forest or the cats?" another RiverClan she-cat asked good-

naturedly, smile gracing her face. She made sure to nod to the ThunderClan trio, an assuring *it's-a-joke* expression exaggerated to its fullest extent. *Mrrows* of laughter were drawn out of the apprentices, and any other cats listening.

Firepaw glanced to a large stone in the middle of the clearing, taking note of Bluestar making a beeline towards it, tuning in only when Sandpaw began to introduce him.

"Firepaw, this is everyone. Everyone, Firepaw," she spoke, gruffness forced out of her voice for the time being. Turning back to 'everyone', Firepaw nodded in greeting.

The silver-and-black tabby was the most friendly. "Hi, Firepaw. I'm Silverpaw—soon to be a warrior. This is Vixenpaw and Grasspaw."

The black she-cat waved a white paw and Grasspaw smiled a bit, giving a curt nod. "We're from RiverClan," Vixenpaw informed him. "If you hadn't noticed."

Between the fish-scent and the border discussion, I don't think I could've ignored *it,* Firepaw thought, giving a confident smile back. The gray tabby from ShadowClan nodded at him next.

"Wetpaw. ShadowClan. If I don't see you next Gathering, I'll see you at a border patrol, I'm sure."

"Wait, ThunderClan doesn't share a border with Shadow—" Firepaw started, before Mallowpaw leapt in.

"I'm Mallowpaw of WindClan! This is Ridgepaw. We were taken in when we were kits," she said, introducing herself for the second time... and Ridgepaw for the first. The tabby tom nodded curtly, not taking his piercing gaze off of Firepaw for a second.

"How long've you been an apprentice, Firepaw?" Silverpaw finally asked, flicking her ear. "I haven't seen you before."

Sandpaw was quick to leap into the conversation, beating Dustpaw to it. "Just a couple of moons. He doesn't get out much."

Firepaw cast her an undignified look. "Hey, that's not fair—" he was

cut off again.

"How long have *you* been an apprentice, Silverpaw?" she challenged. The other she-cat didn't seem to be taken aback by Sandpaw's hostile tone.

"Just a little while. Five or six moons," she mewed calmly, ears swivveling to the rock in the center of the clearing as a yowl sounded across the clearing.

"The Gathering is beginning! Please, gather beneath the Great Rock for a clan meeting," a black-and-white tom yowled, claws sunk into the moss on top of the rock. Firepaw turned, ready to start obediently towards the rock, before he was bumped by some cat.

Turning around, he was face-to-face with Mallowpaw. "Want to sit with us? We don't usually head up there—that's where the elders sit. And they won't let us talk." She blinked her amberish-yellow eyes meaningfully at him, and, although he didn't quite understand the meaning of the blink, he decided to sit with the other apprentices.

What was the worst thing that could happen?

Chapter 16

[image]

The leaders on the rock were practically shadowy silhouettes from where Firepaw sat. The only thing he could see really well was their eyes, and the only reason for that was the fact that they were glowing under the reflection of the pale white moon.

The black-and-white cat, who had announced that the Gathering was beginning, spoke first as Firepaw finished settling in beside Mallowpaw, Dustpaw and Sandpaw on his other side. "WindClan has been doing well. Although we *suspect* that *some cats* are trying to sabotage us—" his annoyance was thinly veiled, and grumbles of annoyance and hisses of indignance wrought the cats beneath the rock "—we are well-fed, and we are prosperous, despite the leaf-bare. Three kits have joined our clan, and we are strong enough to *defend ourselves* if—and *when*—needed. That is all." He cast a look to a raggedy-looking tom on the other side of the rock, eyes—which were amber, Firepaw now noticed—narrowing at him.

The tom hissed, ears flitting backward, starting forward. "If you have something to say, *Tallstar,* say it, for StarClan's sake," he growled, one paw going in front of the other.

"Enough! StarClan has sent us this time to be in *community*, not in *animosity!"* exclaimed a cream-colored leader, shaggy head going from looking to the ShadowClan leader to Tallstar. "Brokenstar, why don't you go next?"

"I'm not an *apprentice,* Crookedstar. Why don't *you* go next?" snarled Brokenstar, bent tail lashing back and forth, its motions spasmatic and wild.

Mallowpaw leaned closer to Firepaw, voice low. "That's Brokenstar. He's evil," she whispered. *I couldn't tell,* Firepaw couldn't help but think as Sandpaw scoffed from his other side.

"Of course he is. He's ShadowClan."

"Youch," muttered Wetpaw, who was at the very end of the line of apprentices, wincing at the verbal blow. "Couldn't've softened it any?"

"I'm sure Sandpaw didn't mean that *you're* evil, Wetpaw," Silverpaw commented, blinking reassuringly at Wetpaw. "And besides, we *still* don't know how Raggedstar died."

Wetpaw raised a brow at Silverpaw as Sandpaw muttered about how *'you don't know what I did and didn't mean'.* "I told you, he died of rat poison. Those two-legs put a bunch of it out, and I guess when the rats bit him, they got it into his wounds."

Grasspaw's brows creased, but she said nothing; she probably didn't want to escalate the already tense situation anymore. Firepaw frowned at it—she knew something, he was confident of it. Why wasn't she *saying* anything about what she'd seen, though?

He turned his attention back to the leaders, watching with wary anticipation. Finally, Crookedstar steeled himself, setting his crooked jaw and giving a curt nod to Brokenstar. "I will indeed." He turned to face the assembled clans, through which murmurs rippled like water at the shore of a lake. "RiverClan is doing well! It's not cold enough for the river to freeze over, and although the water's a little cold, the fish are still abundant!" Firepaw doubted that. Didn't fish hibernate... or something? "And—we'll soon have three new warriors. Trained by the clan's finest," he said, eyes darting to Silverpaw, Vixenpaw, and Grasspaw quickly before he surveyed the crowd once more.

The assembled clans cheered at this bit of information—ShadowClan less-so than most, but that was what Firepaw had halfway expected—and Crookedstar stepped back, a satisfied look on the tom's face.

Mallowpaw turned to the near-warriors. "Congrats! What do you think your names'll be?" she asked amidst a bit of murmuring from the clans as they awaited the next leader's talking.

"Probably Vixenclaw! Or Vixenstrike. Or Vixenstreak!" exclaimed Vixenpaw, always one of the more outgoing apprentices of

RiverClan. She glanced over to Grasspaw who sat quietly next to her, nudging her in a 'go on' sort of way.

Grasspaw shrugged, tabby markings seeming to migrate across her pelt with the motion. "I'm not sure. Maybe Grasswing, or Grass-step? Silverpaw? What do you think-?"

The silver-and-black tabby opened her jaws to speak, but was cut off by a loud clearing of some cat's throat. Once more, the apprentices' attention was turned back to the rock, where the silvery ThunderClan leader, Bluestar stood, surveying the clans.

When she had gotten every cat's attention—which only took a moment with her icy blue gaze—she sat down, drawing her tail neatly over her paws and remaining silent for a moment more, commanding air enhanced by the military-like stiffness in her position. "ThunderClan is fine. Leaf-bare is one of the harder seasons to hunt through, but as always we have survived, and are thriving. Our queens are busy with their kits, our elders are well-fed, and we are strong." She stepped back on that note, nodding to Brokenstar—somewhat reluctantly, it seemed to Firepaw—and the burly tom stepped forward.

He was silent for about two seconds before his voice cut out across the cats. "ShadowClan is strong, as we have always been!" he yowled, voice slicing through the still night air. "We too will soon have new warriors—obviously trained by ShadowClan's strongest warriors." He turned his shaggy head to the other leaders, gaze training on Tallstar for an abnormal amount of time. "Beware, anyone who tries to threaten or attack us. We are strong, and we will fight. You have been warned."

He stepped back, a nasty smile on his broad face, relishing the shocked murmurs of the clans below. Mousefur hissed. *"How dare he* threaten the clans at such a time of *peace!"*

"It's not as if he has anything better to do," Firepaw heard Willowpelt murmur to her friend. A growl rumbled deep in Mousefur's throat, and she glared at Brokenstar.

"Except for maybe run a clan decently for once," Runningwind

muttered, a small chuckle escaping Mousefur's mouth at the comment.

Firepaw leaned back on his haunches, trying to see what Wetpaw's reaction was to it all. His face held no clues. The best he could tell was that he cared, but didn't want any cat to know. But... that was unlikely, wasn't it? Didn't the warrior code demand a cat to be loyal to his leader? Surely even a cat's emotions wouldn't get in the way of honoring the code that StarClan—who he was sure existed—had given?

"That concludes our Gathering," Tallstar yowled to the clans. "WindClan, come on."

With that, the tom *very carefully* scraped his way down the rock—Firepaw could tell he wasn't comfortable or familiar with climbing—and waved his tail, waiting for his clan at the edge of the clearing.

Mallowpaw stretched, standing up. "Well, I guess that's our cue—" she *mrrowed* finally relaxing her body, straightening up and standing normally once more. "I'll see you all later." Her yellowish-orange gaze crept over the ranks of apprentices and she nodded to all before her eyes flitted back to Firepaw.

"Oh wait—Firepaw, you've got a burr in your pelt. I can't believe I didn't see it earlier."

With that, she padded forward, nipped at something at his shoulder, leaning her muzzle close to his ear, and whispered with intensity, "Meeting at the Tunnelers' hideout, four days from now. Be there. And bring Graypaw."

Then she backed up, grinning like a Cheshire... cat, giving him a wink. "Food for thought. Could be a good prank." And then, with a twitch of her tail, she dashed off, disappearing in the throng of cats, Ridgepaw at her heels.

Firepaw blinked and Dustpaw nudged him. *"Someone* is pining after you," he mewed, eliciting a gasp from Vixenpaw.

"You don't think so, do you?" the black she-cat mewed, pacing in front of the group, who had broken ranks and was forming a bit of a huddle, for easier conversation.

"Nah," Dustpaw *mrrowed,* holding back laughter before going silent for a split-second before winking at the she-cat. "Don't tell Firepaw, though," he whispered, well within Firepaw's earshot, a smirk on the dark tom's face.

"Well, hey now—" Firepaw began, about to protest that *no, she does not in fact like me,* before getting thwacked by Sandpaw's tail.

"Obviously, everyone's in love with our great savior here," she dryly drawled, rolling her green eyes, jauntily going over to Firepaw's other side. Deep within her eyes, though, was something Firepaw couldn't quite make out. *Resentment?*

"Well, a cat's loyalty is to her clan," Silverpaw thoughtfully stated, blue eyes boring into Firepaw's skull as she tipped her head to the side. "I imagine it'd be very hard to forsake everyone you knew just to have some cat's kits."

"Ewww!" Vixenpaw spat, sticking out her tongue in disgust. "I'm *never* having any cat's kits!"

The silver tabby shrugged. "I could see it happening. You, some nice tom... falling in love... three moons later, swarmed by tiny little kittens!"

Grasspaw came to her sister's defense. "I can't see it happening, either. For you, though..." she echoed Silverpaw's dreamy voice, "I could see it happening. You, some nice tom—"

"He has to have a sense of humor," Silverpaw interjected, an amused smile on her face.

"*With a sense of humor...* falling in love... moons later swarmed by tiny little kits!"

"Kittens," her friend corrected, rolling her eyes at Firepaw in a *'see what I have to deal with?'* way.

"Well, you guys are just weird," Vixenpaw said with a shiver. "Can I get an amen, Sandpaw?"

Sandpaw blinked, knocked back into reality from where she had been staring off into space. "... What is an *'amen'?"* she asked, suspicious of it already.

Vixenpaw paused. "I... don't really know. Mallowpaw says it a lot, though. Probably some type of hare... or something."

Firepaw couldn't help but snicker at the answer and was batted by Vixenpaw's snowy white paws a second later. He rolled his eyes, tail-tip twitching. "Well, actually—" he began, ears angling towards Bluestar before she even spoke.

"ThunderClan, to me!"

"Well, the word 'amen' means," Firepaw began, only getting so far as pronouncing the 's' in means before Dustpaw spoke over him loudly.

"Let's go. Lovely talking to you all about kitting, rivetting conversation, I have to say. See you next Gathering!" With that, he led Firepaw off before he got to explain that an 'amen' was a type of fish.

"Dustpaw, what *was* that back there?" he finally asked on the way back to camp, thinking back to the conversation, a little weirded out by the idea of himself and Mallowpaw being together.

"What was what?" Dustpaw asked, mind on other things, hardly listening.

"You know... *that."*

Sandpaw padded up beside the two. *"That,"* the sandy she-cat calmly said, poking Dustpaw with her tail-tip, "was Dustpaw flirting."

Firepaw was sure he could see Dustpaw's ear-tips reddening, but it could've just been the light. "I... no I wasn't!"

"Mmm. Yes, I suppose you're right, that wink definitely was not flirting."

"I... was making a comedic point! A satirical evidence!"

Firepaw glanced between the two, a little concerned for his own safety, as it so happened, as he was squashed between the bickering apprentices.

"Yeah, when hedgehogs fly."

Dustpaw silenced himself, puffing out his cheeks a bit, glaring—not in anger—at the she-cat. "Just wait until I find a hedgehog and blast it off the gorge," he muttered, although Firepaw sensed a hint of laughter in his voice.

Firepaw raised his brows at Sandpaw. "What, you like him?" he finally asked, realizing only after he had spoken that just like Dustpaw's hypothetical hedgehog, he had just flown into Sandpaw's danger-zone. Beside him, he sensed Dustpaw's ears pricked, as Sandpaw just glared.

"Of course not! He's like a brother to me."

Dustpaw wilted, but Firepaw pretended not to notice. Interrogation was *later*. He had to ask Sandpaw questions *now*.

"Really."

"Really," the she-cat replied, shrugging a bit as she scented the air. "There are, of course, other cats in ThunderClan."

Firepaw raised his brows, but he didn't have to ask—Dustpaw did. "Great stars, *no."* He said, a grin escaping his stony facade. "You don't mean *Graypaw."*

Sandpaw stopped in her tracks—literally. "What in the actual Silverpelt. Dustpaw, I hope you have better sense than to think I'd like him."

Dustpaw glanced back at her. "I meaaaaan..." he trailed off, laughter lighting up his amber-orange eyes.

Firepaw looked between the two, a twinge of sadness in his chest, although he wasn't sure exactly why. Sandpaw's face broke into a

grin, and she hared towards Dustpaw, who ran for his life. "You pain in the tail!" she yowled, racing after him as he cackled maniacally.

The fiery tom forced a smile onto his face. He wasn't *about* to give any cat—no matter who they were—the satisfaction of knowing about the pain in his heart as he watched the two. *Ah. Young love.*

Chapter 17

[image]

A brown-and-white blur of fluff flew at Firepaw, an attack from Cloverpaw which he barely avoided. Whirling around, careful not to trip on any of the pebbles beneath his paws, Firepaw leapt to the side at a sudden strike from behind as some cat's paw jabbed at his leg.

"Got you!" Graypaw crowed, yellow eyes lighting up. His dark tail whisked back and forth over the dampened rocks and his ears perked at the excitement of winning a battle. Well... a *training session.*

Their mentors—Runningwind included—had decided it was important to train them on different terrains. Last time it had been marsh-like battling, near a cool spring close to the Thunderpath, and the time before that it had been amidst thick grasses near an abandoned twoleg place. This time, it was a dried up creek bed with lots and lots of pebbles. One had to be careful where he stepped... otherwise, he could wrench a paw.

The fiery tom couldn't help but grin at Graypaw. "Nope!" he laughed, turning around from Cloverpaw, whom he had initially been focusing his attention on, to attack Graypaw, leaping at him, and this time *not* missing.

Good thing Whitestorm made the foreleg-and-under doesn't count rule, he thought as he tumbled over the dusty riverbed, claws tangled in Graypaw's thick fur. Graypaw kicked at his stomach, forcing Firepaw to flip away.

Panting hard, fur fluffed out still, Firepaw turned to face his opponent, taking note of Cloverpaw, who sat a few tail-lengths away, drawing a paw through the kicked-up dust, eyes locked still on Graypaw's. "Think you've got me still, Graypaw?" he taunted, unable to suppress a snicker at his friend's disheveled appearance.

"Still think *you've* got *me?"* Graypaw questioned back, grinning. He straightened up, allowing his fur to de-fluff.

From between a tree's roots, the golden frame of Lionheart shifted as he stood up. "Well done, Graypaw! Good technique, Firepaw." His amber eyes flitted to Cloverpaw. "And—Cloverpaw, good teamwork."

Cloverpaw glanced up and gave a small nod, indicating he had heard. *Weird. He used to take training more... seriously.* Firepaw thought to himself, dodging a light cuff to his shoulder from Graypaw absent-mindedly.

Finally, Lionheart spoke again. "Cloverpaw... a word," he meowed, nodding with his shaggy head for the apprentice to follow him.

Graypaw looked to Firepaw, who shrugged, watching his brother go. "Where do you think he's going?" the tom asked, watching the apprentice trot behind a tree to speak to Lionheart.

"Doesn't matter," Mousefur stiffly mewed. "Come on. Back to camp, both of you."

Something was *definitely* up, decided Firepaw as he dragged himself out of the riverbed, directing Graypaw with his tail to a more gradual slope when the tom nearly fell flat on his face. Subsequently padding back to camp, he couldn't help but think. *I wish Cloverpaw would put his heart into it...* he sighed, and before he could think another word, another thought, Graypaw broke in.

"Um, well," he mewed, glancing to the left. "I'd better go. I uh—have training and stuff to work on..." he trailed off. *If it's fighting, I could help him—.*

"What type of training?"

Graypaw seemed to be having trouble speaking. "Oh, you know," he finally mewed, a horrible liar. "I've gotta go... work on my... climbing... skills."

Firepaw decided to play into the lie. "Huh. I thought you did a pretty good job climbing out of the riverbed." He allowed a smile to

break out onto his face, but Graypaw was already laughing, giving him a hard nudge with his shoulder.

"Yeah, okay, not *everybody's* a natural like you." He straightened up, smile staying on his face. "If you must know, I've got a she-cat who's really into me. We'll probably be mates."

Firepaw thought back to the conversation Dustpaw and Sandpaw had had going back from the Gathering, and stopped, begging StarClan that it wasn't the option Dustpaw had suggested. "It's not Sandpaw, right?"

Graypaw looked taken aback. "No way. I flirt, but it's a friendly flirt. Not a..." he waved his tail, gesturing, "romantic flirt."

"Could'a fooled me," Firepaw uttered under his breath, purposefully just loud enough for Graypaw to hear, and received a smack with his friend's tail.

"Come on, you need *some* she-cat. Be glad I'm so generous as to let you have a shot at 'er." He flashed a smile, wiggling his eyebrows. It was Firepaw's turn to smack Graypaw.

"Fine," he laughed, nodding in the direction of the RiverClan border. "Go train with this mysterious she-cat." Graypaw snorted, but said goodbye and bounded off.

Firepaw watched him dash off into the undergrowth, taking note of the scent of herbs coming at him. *It's probably Spottedleaf,* he thought. To his surprise, however, he found himself face-to-face with his own brother.

"Oh, hey, Cloverpaw!" he chirped, seeing the familiar brown-and-white figure before registering by his scent that of course it was him. In Cloverpaw's mouth, a bundle of mint was stuffed, one of the few herbs Firepaw knew.

The tom looked more alive than he had during training and gave a short nod in greeting. *He doesn't exactly look* happy *or* fulfilled, *though...* "I have an idea," Firepaw finally announced, not having thought through the idea or made a fully-thought-out plan at all.

Cloverpaw raised his brows, nodding for Firepaw to follow him to the camp. Quickly catching up with his brother, he spilled his thoughts out onto the cold leaf-bare ground. "We should go visit the littermates." Immediately, Cloverpaw's eyes lit up and he nodded quickly, trying to speak (and saying something unintelligible through a mouthful of herbs). Then, he dashed off into the trees. *That's probably a yes.* And so, Firepaw followed after him, wondering who it could be that Graypaw was so madly in love with.

By the time Firepaw clawed his way out of camp, Cloverpaw a tail-length behind him, he was out of breath. For some reason, Cloverpaw had decided to *sprint* back to camp, *with a mouthful of plants,* which left Firepaw no choice but to follow him. Could've been worse, though. He could've shot off at break-neck speed... oh wait, he did. So no, it couldn't have been worse, *but* at least they were to see the littermates.

And so, through the forest they went. A couple of times, Firepaw glanced over to see Cloverpaw nearly trip over a root or a log or something but... *Being a great warrior isn't as easy as it looks.* He ducked, barely missing a low-hanging branch, relieved to still have both of his eyes. *Heh.*

Finally, the fence came into view. Its warm colors were appealing and homey for Firepaw, and he felt a certain warmth in his chest. It was sort of... a home, at least. He wasn't fully clan, or fully kittypet. It was an odd balance to be sure, and he was reminded even more of how odd balancing in itself was when he nearly toppled off the slender planks. Beside him, Cloverpaw wobbled a bit before casting him a grin and lashing his half-tail, regaining his balance. "You good?" he asked, a somewhat gloating glint in his clover-colored eyes.

Firepaw threw a grin back. "Of course! The question is... are you?"

Cloverpaw rolled his eyes, and simply nodded a few houses over to where the littermates usually met. "I won't even dignify that with a response," he mewed, dignifying the question with a response, before starting over to the yard. "Come on!"

Firepaw leapt off the fence, dashing towards the yard, clawing up one fence, hopping from another, up one, down another, until he finally reached the semi-circle of what he considered to be his family.

Butters laid out, licking her paw, listening to the youngun's chatter, occasionally putting in a word or two. Princess and Luna were chatting about different foods, and it sounded like Filou and Smudge—who weren't enemies, as they used to be—were becoming closer. At least, from an outsider's perspective. It was like walking into a memory.

Luna looked up from her conversation with Princess, eyes lighting up upon seeing Firepaw and Cloverpaw. "Guys, they're back!" she hollered to the toms, who were only a tail-length away, before bounding forward and touching noses with first Cloverpaw and then Firepaw. Princess trotted behind her, a smile on her face.

"Hi Firepaw. Cloverpaw. How's ThunderClan?"

Cloverpaw gave a shrug, ignoring the incredulous look of Filou upon seeing his battle wounds... which consisted of a scratch and a small blood clot on his shoulder by then. "Pretty good. Been protecting 'em," he said, a sly smile creeping onto his face.

"I *told* you ThunderClan couldn't heal him! Look at that blood," Filou triumphantly mewed, coming forward, hazel eyes alight with the slight victory. Princess rolled her eyes, but Luna spoke before she could.

"Yeah, okay, 'cause a couple a' scratches'll disprove generations of herbery."

"Obviously, he can't be healed by *plants."*

"Actually," Cloverpaw cut in, answering Filou's objection, "you'd be surprised at how planty the stuff in the claw-tube-thingies smelled. And then the white cobweb thing on my tail had some sort of herb-ey poltice under it. So."

Luna flashed her brother a pleased look, giving Filou a queenly,

victorious, smirk. "Told ya so." Filou, meanwhile, *humphed,* returning to sit beside Smudge, who purred upon seeing his two returning friends.

"Sure is good to see you two. Butters had us worried."

Cloverpaw dramatically sighed, starting to pace slowly, as if he were performing in front of an audience. "Butters, *what* exactly did you tell them?" he mewed, a spring in his step.

Butters stretched out her lanky form, taking her sweet time, and eyeing Cloverpaw with a familiar *don't-get-your-whiskers-in-a-bunch, not-everyone's-as-quick-as-you-whippersnappers* look. "Now, I don't want any a' you kittens getting worried," she begin, being met with an *'awh come on'* from Luna, "but I do have some bad news."

Firepaw perked his ears, swivvelling them to the old creamish-yellow she-cat, who finally sat up, coat bathed in warm sunlight, turning it a glittery light gold color.

"But one a' my friends recently... was murdered." Firepaw's brows furrowed, and no cat said anything until Butters elaborated. "By a clan cat."

"By a clan cat? But... that's impossible! Clan cats are good," Cloverpaw interjected, green eyes big and concerned. "We wouldn't do something so bad... like that..." he trailed off.

Butters cast him a saddened look, but continued. "You youngun's didn't know 'im, but he was a tom named Jake. A real friendly fella'. Anyway, one day, I was out for a walk, and I got the smell of blood. So I followed the smell and... there was Jake. All bloody and broken." Her amber gaze portrayed absolute sorrow at his death, but her body did not. She hid it well.

"Do you know what clan? Could it have been a rogue? Wait—how do you even *know* what clan cats *smell* like?" Firepaw couldn't stop himself from asking. His eyes were glued to Butters as he tried to read her every movement.

The she-cat shrugged. "You boys carry the scent. And..." she

hesitated, making Firepaw and Cloverpaw lean in more with anticipation "...I've had run-ins with them before." She shook her head. "I'm just warnin' y'all's all. Don't get hurt out there in the big forest."

Firepaw shivered despite the warmth of the sun on his back. "Well... warriors don't kill," he said, trying to mumble but failing, voice clear as a cold winter day.

"Well. This one did." Butters' gaze was dark already, and then she shrugged. "Just be careful's all."

The conversation ended. Luna obviously wanted to say something. She *really* wanted to say something, clearly. From the way she picked at blades of grass beneath her feet, to how she kneaded her claws into the ground... she had something to *say*. Finally, she spoke, an intensity and curiosity in her green gaze bright and clear as dawn. "So... how's liberating ThunderClan going?"

Firepaw shrugged. "It's going okay."

"Mhm. Going great, actually."

"Yeah, clan's getting fed." Firepaw glanced over to Cloverpaw, his somewhat partner-in-crime, taking note of how he side-eyed him back. Luna was, however, unconvinced.

"Not cutting it. What's going on? What's life like there?"

Princess butted in, curling her fluffy tail over her paws like Bluestar did, ears pricked and eyes bright. "Are there kits there? What's the food like?"

Filou looked to his sisters, then spoke finally. "And what's the weather like over there?"

Firepaw's chest warmed. His family wanted to know about ThunderClan. And so, he began to tell the story of his adventures... that far. And when it was time to go home, he felt a sort of accomplishment. Padding back to ThunderClan with Cloverpaw at his side, he couldn't have guessed what would happen the next day. But Cloverpaw did; in fact, he was a key player in the following

events.

A/N: GUYS! We reached 1.2K! Thanks so much, I can't believe it! What do you want to see as an extra chapter? A POV? Character designs? What're *you* looking forward to? ~Pringles

Chapter 18

[image]

Cloverpaw paced back and forth in front of Firepaw, no less panicked-looking than when the two had had the interview with the senior-ish (Firepaw had learned that Longtail had only been made a warrior three or four moons before) warriors. *It feels like so long ago...* the tom couldn't help but think before shaking himself out of his thoughts to face the present hurdle to hop. Cloverpaw.

"Why me?" Cloverpaw groaned, tail sweeping the hard, frozen, ground, sweeping up the few leaves that had managed to cover it. "Why, StarClan, did it have to be *me?"*

"Why did *what* have to be you?" Firepaw pressed, for the eighth time, forcing back an eye-roll at his brother's hysterics. "If you won't tell me what's *wrong,* I can't help you."

The brown tabby tom in front of Firepaw fixed him with his light green gaze, freezing as ice, intense as fire. "If I tell you, they'll kill you."

Firepaw blinked. *"What?"*

"If I tell you," Cloverpaw mewed, ear flicking, walking back and forth over the ground, having finally healed, "they could kill you. Like they almost killed *her."*

Okay... so it's a she-cat. Whatever this is. "Cloverpaw, *who* almost killed... who?" *That felt redundant.* And so he rephrased the question: "What I mean is, what cat was killed, and who tried to do it?"

The tabby paced more, tail twitching wildly. "When I was there... he tried to get me. Told me it was by orders of the 'leader', whoever that is. Then they were discussing killing her. So if I can stop her from dying, we should be good..." he muttered to himself. *I should take him to see Spottedleaf.*

"You feeling okay, Cloverpaw?" the flame-colored tom asked his brother, ear twitching in concern. "Maybe we should go to the medicine-" before Firepaw could even finish his sentence, Cloverpaw whirled around, fixing him with his wild gaze.

"NO! We *cannot* go see Spottedleaf, that's what *they* want!"

"Um... well, what about seeing Graypaw? I'm sure he could help..." Firepaw spoke, startled and trying to get his thoughts together. *This whole thing must have something to do with Spottedleaf... but what could it be?*

Firepaw took a deep breath, then offered up another option. "Are you sure you don't need help? Maybe Luna would be of... assistance...." He finally trailed off, not knowing where he was going with this. He felt like he was crazy. *What help would Luna be? She's not a medicine cat!* His gaze flitted back to Cloverpaw once more, who was shaking his head vehemently. *I guess... Cloverpaw isn't either, and he's pretty good with plants.*

"We *CAN'T* see *ANYONE* about this, not *NOW,* not *EVER!* They will *KILL EVERYONE."* Cloverpaw shook his pelt, and like that, he seemed to snap out of it. "I'm going back to camp," he murmured, turning his back to Firepaw and starting off.

With wide eyes, Firepaw gave a small nod, not sure what had just happened. *Maybe... he was rabid?* he guessed, before quickly dismissing the idea. *Rabid animals have foaming mouths.* As crazy as Cloverpaw had been, he wasn't foaming.

From the bushes behind him emerged Runningwind. "Firepaw!" called his mentor, sounding relieved. "I've been looking for you all over. Come on, Whitestorm wanted to go over the warrior code with all of the apprentices."

"All of the apprentices?" the apprentice questioned, brow furrowing. Runningwind gave a fast nod, movements swift as ever.

"Yes! Right now. In the training hollow."

"Cloverpaw just went back to camp... I can get him, if you'd like,"

Firepaw offered quickly-maybe a little *too* quickly-before Runningwind shook his head, then nodded in the general direction of the training hollow.

"He's on elder duty. Mousefur's orders." *What could he have done to deserve such a thing?* Firepaw asked himself, giving a mindless flick of his tail in response.

"I'll go right over," he mewed, leaping off into the undergrowth, mind wandering, paws carrying him to the sandy hollow.

The sound of voices came to his ears before he registered the scents. "Sandpaw, wait 'til I get you!" cried Graypaw, only to be met with a scoff from the she-cat.

"When hedgehogs fly-fighting never was your style." There was a royal lilt to her voice, and Firepaw was inclined to think she was simply sitting still, watching Graypaw with little interest.

He walked into the cold, leaf-cleared hollow just in time to see Graypaw nearly faceplant, and Sandpaw pull away. "I told you so," she mewed with a smirk flicking her tail in his face, before padding over to sit next to Dustpaw.

Firepaw sat on her other side, with Graypaw next to him. "Firepaw!" the deep voice of Whitestorm sounded from between a couple of roots of a tree. "There you are. We can begin, then."

And like that, the large white tom sat down, gaze surveying the four apprentices. Something like déjà vu crossed his mind, and a foreign warmth burnt in his chest. "Today we're going to go over the Warrior Code," Whitestorm announced once everyone was settled. Graypaw stifled a groan and Sandpaw rolled her eyes.

"It's what governs the clans; it controls even the leader," he continued, and, despite Firepaw's trying to pay rapt attention, his mind drifted elsewhere.

Staring off into the distance, his thoughts bounced around. *What did Cloverpaw mean by "they might kill you too"? Who is* they? *And why did they try to kill Cloverpaw? Is it possible to-*

"Firepaw," hissed Graypaw from beside him, cutting off his thoughts as the tom nudged him. Tuning back in, Firepaw found Whitestorm still speaking. He blinked, watching the large tom pace back and forth in a spirited lecture.

"The third part of the code is this: kits, queens, and elders eat first. When we don't honor *this* rule, the most vulnerable cats of our clan go hungry."

Firepaw nodded a bit, taking in the words. Runningwind had taught him the code already; he hadn't *memorized* it, per se, but he knew the basics of it. The flame-colored tom felt a nudge in his side and he glanced over to see Sandpaw.

"Psst. Firepaw." He blinked, letting her know he heard her. The sandy she-cat lifted up a paw, gesturing with her muzzle to a small, red, ant on it. The bug crawled about, then stopped, as if staring up at Firepaw and considering what to do next. "I've heard from the elders that if you eat one it gives you good luck-here you go." She shoved her paw closer to his muzzle, and he blinked. This was... generous, if Sandpaw was telling the truth.

Whitestorm cleared his throat. "Sandpaw, *put that fire ant down."* Firepaw blinked. That little ant didn't *look* like it was on fire.

"But Whitestorm, Firepaw might not know what it is-we're Clanmates, we have to look out for eachother and it's best to show him the forest in a closed environment so that he-" Whitestorm gestured with his tail to silence his apprentice, who gave a prolonged sigh.

"I don't care that Firepaw might not know what it is. Now is not the right time to show him-and he certainly doesn't need to get bitten by one." He cast her a look, clearly indicating that the rest of the session was going to be a no-nonsense one.

Sandpaw groaned, rolling her eyes, before settling down, flicking the fire ant far away. *I wonder why it's called a fire ant...* Firepaw thought to himself, before settling down himself and listening to Whitestorm. Well, half-listening, half trying to solve the mystery Cloverpaw had fixed him with.

The rest of the afternoon was chilly. Whitestorm dismissed the apprentices to go back to camp and help Cloverpaw do whatever he was doing-apparently, he either didn't know or had forgotten about Mousefur inflicting the apprentice with elder duty-and Firepaw found the walk back enjoyable.

That is, until he got to the entrance of the camp. Just glancing down into the ravine where it was settled, at the brownish-tan grass that sprouted from the earth at the bottom, he felt something drop in his stomach. It was as if he had swallowed a stone, and, if his body were made of water, it had sunken down to the depths.

In the center of the camp stood a deep brown tabby tom, short tail lashing back and forth in annoyance. Beside him was the familiar pelt of Wetpaw, gray pelt dull compared to the large silver tom's to his left. A slender tortoiseshell she-cat was on Wetpaw's right, and she stared expectantly at the leader's den. Finally, after what felt like an eternity-but was really just a second-Bluestar emerged from her vine-covered den, elegant and serene as ever. Tasting the air, a pine-like scent entered Firepaw's nose, marshy and wet like a bog, accompanied with a frogish smell. *ShadowClan.*

Chapter 19

[image]

Firepaw crept down the slope into camp, watching the ShadowClan cats with curiosity. Upon seeing the tortoiseshell she-cat, he realized he realized that he recognized her from a meeting of the Tunnlers, and gave her a slight nod—which she didn't return, probably for the best—in greeting. To Wetpaw, he gave a flick of his tail, which the apprentice reciprocated.

Next to Wetpaw was a huge, silver, tom, who stared around at the camp, keeping up a stoic and regal gaze. When Bluestar emerged from her den, he gave a deep bow to her in greeting. The she-cat looked a little surprised at first—Firepaw could only tell, however, by the small step backwards she had taken—then bowed back, perhaps not quite as deep, but close enough.

"ShadowClan. What are you doing in ThunderClan camp?" she mewed, voice carrying across the camp. A couple queens crouched at the nursery, guarding it just in case.

The tom introduced himself as Boulder. "We are here to inform you that Brokenstar is dead." A few shocked mews sounded in the camp. "Blackfoot is dead as well. We found dog and fox scent on them. They were practically shredded, near the WindClan border. WindClan has been speaking of foxes for moons; it was a ploy. Nevertheless, I am now the leader of ShadowClan, and I journey to the Moonstone tonight. That is all." Firepaw blinked. This was absurd; even if there *was* a fox on WindClan's territory, and they had accidentally chased it onto ShadowClan land, why were they being blamed? The silver tom waited a moment for some cat to protest. Sure enough, Longtail spoke up.

"How did you become leader? Last I checked, Blackfoot was deputy." Bluestar shot him a look, but he had already spoken.

Boulder nodded. "A reasonable question. Our medicine cat, Runningnose, proclaimed a message from StarClan, saying that I

was meant to be leader."

Longtail cast him a dubious look, but a quick glance at Bluestar made him keep his mouth shut. Bluestar finally nodded. "ThunderClan is sorry for ShadowClan's loss; he was not our leader, but he was appointed by StarClan. If that is all, we will escort you to your border."

The cats in the ShadowClan patrol glanced at each other before Boulder gave another nod. "Very well." From beside Bluestar, Redtail padded up.

"Lionheart, Graypaw—escort them to their border," the tortoiseshell mewed, glancing to Bluestar for a brief moment and registering the approving ear flick before his eyes darted back to the patrol.

Graypaw's ears perked up at the idea of escorting enemy warriors out of ThunderClan camp, and he trotted quickly to stand beside Lionheart, who stood at attention. Firepaw, meanwhile, made a beeline to Dustpaw and Sandpaw, who sat side by side, staring at the spectacle of ShadowClan warriors in ThunderClan camp.

"Why're ShadowClan and WindClan at eachothers' throats all the time?" he finally asked as the patrol made its way out, Graypaw at the rear and talking to Wetpaw. Dustpaw turned his gaze to the fire-colored tom and promptly rolled his eyes.

"Fireface, how do you *not* know?" Sandpaw jumped in before her friend had a chance to ask. Firepaw let out a chuckle.

"Fireface?"

"You heard me. Anyway, WindClan and ShadowClan have been enemies since the dawn of the clans."

Dustpaw gave a small shrug. "I'm not sure their rivalry goes back *that* far."

Sandpaw raised a brow at the tom, but said nothing, allowing him to continue. Firepaw glanced between the two, trying to read their secret language and found nothing. "WindClan and ShadowClan just aren't friends—they're on different sides of the Thunderpath, same

as us and ShadowClan, but they've just always gone back and forth." He didn't seem to have much more to add, and Sandpaw gave a smug smile.

"Told you it went back to the dawn of the clans. Anyways, ShadowClan is bigger than WindClan—I get they have their pride and all of that, but if they went head-to-head..." she shook her short pelt, as if she were avoiding shivering at the thought, "WindClan would be dead."

Firepaw sat back on his haunches. "If it's been going on since the dawn of time, surely it'll be done soon," he said aloud, watching the twos' faces carefully. Sandpaw merely flicked her ear in dismissal, but Dustpaw's face clouded, brows furrowing as he thought.

"I guess," the deep brown tom mumbled, staring off into space. Sandpaw touched the tip of her tail to the tom's shoulder and shrugged.

"We're on elders' duty—and I'm *not* doing it by myself," she mewed, nodding towards the leaf-crowded entrance of the den. Dustpaw blinked slowly at Firepaw and then leapt off after Sandpaw, who had gotten a few steps ahead by the time he turned.

The flame-colored tom stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do, until a black-and-white ball of fur flew out of nowhere, attacking him with such ferocity, he wasn't sure if it were an overgrown mouse or... *ah. Swiftkit.* Obligingly, Firepaw rolled over, allowing himself to be knocked by the tom, who leapt back a second later, bright smile on his face.

"Hi, Firepaw!"

The patched kit was up to Firepaw's shoulder, barely five moons, but very ready to be an apprentice already. His amber eyes—not unlike Mousefur's pale yellow ones, now that Firepaw thought about it—blinked warmly, and he squatted into a battle crouch, rakish grin spreading across his face. "Wanna fight?" he mewed, darting out a paw in challenge.

Firepaw barely kept himself from rolling his eyes, instead giving a

mrrow of laughter. "Why not," he mewed, nodding towards an empty corner of camp, beckoning the kit to follow him. Glancing over to the nursery, he caught sight of Brightkit and her brother, Thornkit, watched the two go over. He gave a smile and a friendly tail flick, inviting them over with a tip of his head.

The two raced out, Brightkit a few tail-lengths ahead of Thornkit, grinning like a cheshire... well, cat. She skidded up to a stop in front of Firepaw and looked up to him, a look of excitement burning in her blue eyes. "Hi!" she half-meowed, half-yelled, bubbly excitement infectious. Her brother was a little slower to come up, normally sandy-yellow pelt caught by the sun and turning gold. He gave a nod of greeting, something apprentices and warriors usually did, catching Firepaw off-guard for a moment. *He's mature for... what, three moons?*

"When're we going to *fight?"* Swiftkit demanded, leaping about and batting at a leaf. Brightkit rolled her eyes and bumped against him.

"We're not going to *fight,"* she said, and Firepaw wondered what they *were* going to do, "we're going to *spar!"* The ginger-and-white she-cat paused and looked to Firepaw. "Right!?"

He blinked. *Aren't fighting and sparring... the same thing?* He nodded. "Riiiiight." He looked from Thornkit to Brightkit to Swiftkit. "Okay, who wants to fight who?"

"I want to fight *you!"*

"Firepaw!"

"I wanna fight Firepaw!"

Firepaw felt warmth in his ears, and stifled back a laugh. *I'm popular today!* "Okay, okay. We'll do claws and whiskers for it."

Swiftkit tilted his head. "We'll do *what?"*

Thornkit's brows furrowed and he tipped his head to the side. *"Claws and whiskers?"* he mewed, simple confusion on his face. Brightkit bounced up and down—literally.

"Claws and whiskers! YES!" With a dramatic movement, she paused, whipping her head to Firepaw. "What's claws and whiskers?"

Everyone in the party, it seemed, was confused. "What do you mean 'what's claws and whiskers'? You've never played?"

Swiftkit shook his head. "Must be an outsider thing," he mewed matter-of-factly.

"Teach us!" Brightkit exploded, bouncing up and down once more. Firepaw smiled a little bit and put a paw forward.

"Everyone put your paw in the middle. The first two to be out fight, and then the other two fight." Each cat put their paw next to Firepaw's and he began to rhyme.

"Whiskers the cat went in search of a rat,
Got caught on a hook, landed flat on his back
Hooked a paw in the wall, then took a big fall,
So how many claws did he lose in all?"

With each syllable, he gestured to each cat with his head, keeping count with his tail also, before he landed on Swiftkit. The bicolor tom looked up at him. "How many claws did he lose in all?" Firepaw prompted, waiting for the tom-kit's answer.

"Three!" he exclaimed, and Firepaw counted from him onward.

"One." Brightkit's paw. "Two." His own paw. "Three!" Thornkit's paw. He nodded with his nose to a patch of dead grass a few mouse-lengths away. "Thornkit, go over there."

Thornkit nodded, padding over to the sunshine and sitting down, watching the trio. Firepaw recited the chant once more, landing this time on himself. *Okay...* he thought, before speaking aloud: "Six."

He counted from Brightkit to Swiftkit to himself twice, landing on himself as a final count. *Guess that's me.* "Alright, great. We'll have a tournament!"

Brightkit tilted her head. "What's a *tournament?"* the kit asked, confusion settling on her face.

Right. Kits. Firepaw straightened up and shrugged. "Whoever wins these fights gets to fight the next round. So if Thornkit wins against me, and you win against Swiftkit, Brightkit, then you two fight and whoever wins that fight is the ultimate winner."

A grin graced Brightkit's face, and she leapt at Swiftkit. "I'm gonna be the *ultimate winner!"* the she-kit exclaimed, bowling the black-and-white kit over.

"Not if *I* win first!" the tom growled back, batting at the other kit. Firepaw swivveled on one paw, turning to face Thornkit.

"Ready?" he asked, squatting into a hunting position. *I'll let him win.*

Without saying anything, Thornkit crouched, giving a nod. His tail swept back and forth and he wiggled his hind quarters before leaping forward.

Firepaw dodged to the left, noticing how he favored his left side more. "Try adjusting your weight—you're off-balance. You'll get more power if you're even." Thornkit nodded solemnly, shifting his weight so that he was even on both sides.

He leapt once more, meeting his mark. He was large enough to knock Firepaw over, and the two tusseled for a second. From seemingly nowhere, Thornkit's paw came at Firepaw's eye. *Ow!* He closed the eye, noticing it watering, and realized he was at a significant disadvantage.

"GO FIREPAW!" a screech sounded. *Brightkit. Of course.* The she-kit, Firepaw was sure, was bouncing up and down with such excitement... that he was a little concerned for the ground beneath her.

With a grunt, Thornkit managed to come up on top. He blocked the sun, and all Firepaw could see was his triumphant face. "Did I win?" he asked hopefully, shifting off.

"Sure did," Firepaw mewed, feeling a grin creep onto his face. "Who won in your match?"

Brightkit's ears flattened and her tail drooped. "Swiftkit. But he's

bigger so it only makes *sense."*

She sounds like Sandpaw, Firepaw thought to himself, before giving a small nod. "So it's Swiftkit verses Thornkit for the final." He sat back on his haunches, noticing how Brightkit was already circling the two.

Swiftkit leapt at Thornkit, who, thanks to his size, quickly avoided the tom, slithering to the side like an otter. Firepaw watched, more of a spectator than anything, making sure nobody died.

"Hey," a voice sounded beside him, from Goldenflower. The thickly-furred she-cat sat down watching the kits, too.

Firepaw nodded to her. "Hi. Where's Bramblekit and Tawnykit?" he asked taking his eyes off of the kits finally.

She lifted her shoulder, and Firepaw couldn't help but be partially blinded—especially in his paw-struck eye—by the way the light shone off her golden coat. "In the nursery. Speckletail's watching them. You're good with kits."

"Oh—thanks." A silence stretched on for a few moments as the two watched the sparring kits. Brightkit leapt around like a squirrel on the run.

"LET'S GO THORNKIT! No no- not THAT way. Go the *OTHER* way! SWIFTKIT GOOD BLOW YEAHHHHH—"

The she-kit was loud. And energetic. And... insane. Goldenflower changed the subject abruptly. "Got your eye on any she-cats in the clan?" she asked, nudging him with her shoulder.

So many. So, so many questions about this. Firepaw, nonetheless, felt warmth spreading through his cheeks and up to his ears. Goldenflower stared closely at him, and gave a grin.

"Aha! Your eyes betray you, Firepaw. Who is it? *Tell me* it's not Spottedleaf." She lowered her voice, eyes darting around conspirationally. "That's against the code, you know. Is it Sandpaw?"

Firepaw felt his face redden more. "I mean, it's not really—"

"It *is* Sandpaw!" She sat back on her haunches, tilting her head. She paused a moment, silence hanging in the air like rain that refused to fall. Finally, a storm poured out. "I approve."

Um. "Sorry?"

"I approve of your choice. You'd be good mates."

Too far, too far ahead! Save me, Spirits of the Sky! Firepaw was a little surprised at the thought—he hadn't considered the Spirits of the Sky for a long time—but allowed himself, nonetheless, to think it through. "Well, that's a little far in the future," he mewed diplomatically. "We'll see. I at least want to get through apprenticeship."

Goldenflower nodded. "Wise words. So after apprenticeship is still on the table?" A mischievous grin made its way onto her face and Firepaw found himself giving a little laugh.

"I guess."

Swiftkit gave a triumphant yowl a few tail-lengths away. Firepaw glanced over, seeing him over Thornkit, and gave a smile. "Well done, Swiftkit!" cried Goldenflower, hurrying forward to nuzzle him, which he quickly shied away from.

"Goldenflowerrrrr—" groaned Swiftkit, trying to get out of his mother's grip. She furiously groomed him, ruffling the fur on the top of his head with her tongue.

"Can we go again?" Thornkit asked, shaking out his short pelt. Firepaw was a little surprised—he hadn't pegged the kit as a fighter. *And,* hadn't he just lost a fight?

"Please, please, please?" begged Brightkit, looking up hopefully at the fiery apprentice. The tom couldn't help it; he was an older brother. He smiled.

"Of course."

"And can we do Claws and Whiskers???" Brightkit asked excitedly, bouncing up and down. A nod.

"Of course."

"Now!??"

"Of course." Thornkit cut in, mimicking the older tom's voice and eliciting an unexpected guffaw of laughter from Firepaw. He *also* hadn't pegged the kit as... this type of cat. *He'll be good friends with Graypaw,* he decided.

Swiftkit trotted over and put his paw into the ring of three other paws. "Whiskers the cat went in search of a rat..."

The rest of the day was filled with kit-training, as Firepaw resorted to calling it in his mind. Swiftkit was—unsurprisingly—a good fighter, nearly winning without aid, and Brightkit was as exciteable as a squirrel on the first day of newleaf.

Glancing over once, he caught the eye of Goldenflower, who gave a reassuring smile. *You're good with kits,* her voice echoed in his mind.

I guess so, he remarked to himself.

Character Designs I: Firepaw, Princess, Filou, Cloverpaw, and Luna

[image]

Hey everyone! This is the very first edition of Character Designs. Basically, whenever I reach a landmark reads count, I'll put out both written and illustrated designs for characters. This first time, it's the firgang... er, I need a better name for it than that, but, it's Firepaw and Cloverpaw's sibs, and in birth order.

First up, everyone's favorite flame-colored hero, Firepaw! This guy, I feel, is pretty cannon, as most everybody sees him like this. Here's a written headcannoned description:

Normal-sized emerald green eyes. Whenever he's excited—which is often—they widen a little bit, giving him a funny happy-startled look. They used to get REALLY BIG when he was a kit... but it's faded off by chapter fifteen, so he's a full-grown firefly. Sometimes Firestar is tabby and sometimes he isn't... my brain doesn't like deciding which, ahah. I think for now, though, he at least has faint tabby markings. He definitely has different "layers", so to speak, of different orange-tinted fluff. He's slightly taller than normal and long-furred, thanks to his father, Jake! Jake was of the Somali breed, and some of those genes transferred on to his first-born. (And yes, he *does* have a white patch on his chest that looks like a flame, sorry not sorry.)

Here's an illustrated Firepaw!

[image]

Next, Princess! Fun fact, she and Firestar are the only ones out of their littermates—at least in headcannon world—to not have long fur. Go figure. Anyways, she also has green eyes, and they're just a

little lighter than Firestar's emerald green ones. She's tabbied and rather beautiful, just like her little sister Luna. She's a pale creamish-brown color, and unlike Firestar, she's just normal cat height. There's this thing that cats often do called chickening, and I imagine she'd do that to her kits. Also, it's her side of the line that gives Cloudtail his fluffy fur—not her mate's (and, I like to imagine that contrary to popular headcannon, Smudge was her mate... just because I can lol. I think Firboi would be happy that his best kittypet friend and sister are a thing). She has really soft fur and fluffy paws. She's a lot like Spottedleaf, both in her mannerisms and personality, which I think is one of the reasons Firestar fell for the infamous ThunderClan medicine cat.

Here she is!

[image]

The third sibling of the Firefamily (sounds like something you'd call Pokemon in the fire element) is Filou! He's a very worried boy. He's like his brother, in that he has ginger fur, but it's light ginger, not the dazzling highlighter orange of his brother (/hj). He's very sweet, and I imagine him to be a bit like Miles from the musical Tuck Everlasting (give it a listen, it's pretty good). He's such a good older brother, and he's a little envious of Firestar (Tommy looks up to him, like, a lot), but he and Tommy/Cloverpaw are good friends, given that they're denmates (they live in the same house). As to how he looks—pale ginger, like I said. He's got white paws, a white belly, and a white muzzle, and a normal-length tail. He doesn't have stripes, so he sticks out like that, BUT he does have the little paw/ankle markings similar to Firboi's. He's short-furred and average height, and he has really pretty hazel eyes. If Rusty hadn't gone out into the woods, and if Tommy didn't go with him, he probably would have. All of Jake's kids (on Nutmeg's side) are pretty adventurous.

Filou! Viola!

[image]

After Filou is Tommy/Cloverpaw. He's very sweet and a tad bit nervous (not Fourth Apprentice Alderpaw-level, but nervous

nonetheless), but VERY adventurous. He likes plants, a lot, and Bluestar *did* consider giving him to Runningwind as an apprentice... but figured he probably should be toughened up with Mousefur instead. Speaking of Mousefur, the two have a very interesting relationship. On the one hand—ahem, *paw*—, Mousefur doesn't hate him, and tolerates him pretty well. But on the other, they're not as close as Firepaw and Runningwind. No matter! Anyways, as to looks, Cloverpaw is pretty much your average cat. He has brown tabbied fur over most of him, a white belly/chest area, muzzle, and legs. On his hind left leg, near his paw, he has a small smudge of tabbied brown fur. He's only got half of his tail, thanks to an adventurous mishap he had with a human trap (if you want to read about this, do comment, please!), but he's all good and still very adventurous! He has clover-green eyes (hence his name, Cloverpaw), and wouldn't be a bad medicine cat, if he chose to go down that route. He's not so sure that's the best option, though. Anyways, he became friends with Graypaw when he adventured onto ThunderClan territory one day, and they've been buds ever since!

Here we go!

[image]

And finally, Luna! I love the name, and, although I didn't come up with it, I can totally see how that works with her personality. Luna's actually based on a cat I had for a little bit, who was just gorgeous. She has browns and gingers all over her, and lots of tabby markings. She has green eyes, too, but more grass-colored! She ALMOST had a little moon mark on her shoulder or somewhere... but then I ditched that ahah. She's got a black nose, which she got from her mom, and is the only one out of her siblings to have one. Anyways, she's probably the least well-known of all of Firestar's siblings thus far. So let me introduce her a bit more for ya. Luna is a sweet girl, and very adventurous, like her sibs. While she only stands at normal cat height, if not a little bit shorter, she's an intimidating figure, and makes up for her rather skinny frame with a quick mind and a sharp tongue. She makes friends quickly, and while she's not super open to change, at least location-wise, she *does* love a good conversation, and a good cat to have a conversation

with. She's a jokester, which is part of the reason she and Graypaw became bros, but she also knows how to take stuff seriously... sometimes. I think that she'd really like Spottedleaf, too, in a big-sisterly way. While they don't have the exact same personality, I think they'd mesh quite well, and besides—they're both calicos, and in the Warriors world of we-won't-say-outright-that-the-cat's-a-calico, calico besties have to stick together!

Here's my girl, Luna!

[image]

And that's it for Firestar's siblings! Who do you want to see next batch? Hope you enjoyed, see you 'round!

~Pringles